

SM in Postmodern America

Dissertation

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By

Marie Franco, M.A.

Graduate Program in English

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Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Debra Modellmog, Co-Advisor

Dr. Brian McHale, Co-Advisor

Dr. Martin Joseph Ponce

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Abstract

In the second half of the twentieth century, American culture was characterized by a social and political climate that feared sexual non-normativity—from the Cold War’s Lavender Scare, to the 1970s New Right’s “Save Our Children” campaigns, and the 1980s AIDS epidemic—and, paradoxically, by an expansion of sexual freedom and the proliferation of newly visible sexual subcultures—as evidenced by a two-page *Life* magazine photo spread of a gay, San Francisco leather bar in 1964, the Stonewall Uprising, the creation of gay liberation groups across college campuses, and ACT UP’s nationally televised activism. Amidst these shifting attitudes towards sexuality there was a growing cultural fascination with sadomasochism in both high and low art. *SM in Postmodern America*, covers four decades of cultural and literary production, examining the rise of sexually explicit—in particular sadomasochistic—representations in two fields that have traditionally been kept separate: postmodern American fiction and the texts produced by and for queer SM communities. Through literary analysis, historical research, and deep archival work, this project demonstrates the interrelatedness of postmodern fiction and non-canonical queer texts, developing a practitioner-based theorization of SM that intervenes in queer theory, literary studies, and post-WWII history.

Beginning with an overview of sadomasochism in canonical texts that span the temporal, political, and aesthetic range of high postmodernism—William Burroughs’s

Naked Lunch (1959, 1962), Robert Coover's short story "The Babysitter" from *Pricksongs & Descants* (1969), and Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote* (1986)—my analysis focuses on how pleasure is represented and the details of specific sexual acts. This study of postmodern fiction radically revises literary scholarship that desexualizes postmodern representations of SM by limiting its function to the level of metaphor. I further develop this new approach to SM and articulate how SM functions as a positive and productive force for queerness through close-readings of practitioner-produced, queer SM erotica by John Preston, Patrick Califia, and Carol Queen. By establishing how SM produces knowledge, community, narrative innovation, and new modes of relationality, this project reclaims SM from the antisocial turn in queer theory. Through archival research on key SM authors and organizations, as well as a study of foundational, practitioner-produced texts—Larry Townsend's *The Leatherman's Handbook* (1972) and Samois's *Coming to Power* (1981)—I articulate the relevance of a positive-productive understanding of SM beyond the textual realm and demonstrate how SM is both produced by and productive of narrative. Finally, I return to canonical fiction and deploy a positive-productive understanding of SM in my reading of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and in doing so, this reading illuminates how postmodernist poetics are themselves intertwined with SM narrative practices.

By recuperating a body of literature that has been overlooked in both literary studies and queer theory—the essays, pornography, educational texts, and memoir

produced by and for queer SM practitioners from the 1960s through the late 1990s—and linking it to canonical representations of sadomasochism in postmodern fiction, this study initiates a new understanding of SM that emphasizes its queer potentiality and productive possibilities, as opposed to the disruptive and abstract qualities emphasized in previous scholarship. In doing so, *SM in Postmodern America* reimagines the significance of embodied erotic practice in literature, in queer theory, and in culture.

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Vita

2006.....	Burlingame High School
2010.....	B.A., English, West Virginia Wesleyan College
2013.....	M.A., English, Georgetown University
2013 to present	Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of English, The Ohio State University

Publications

“Queer Sex, Queer Text: SM in *Gravity’s Rainbow*.” *Thomas Pynchon, Sex, and Gender*. University of Georgia Press, 2018.

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Introduction. A History of Censorship

In March 1965, Massachusetts Superior Court Judge Eugene A. Hudson affirmed the city of Boston's decision to ban the sale of William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (Grove Press, 1962), despite its defense by literary luminaries and scholars; in deeming the text obscene, Judge Hudson expressed how "the author first collected the foulest and vilest phrases describing unnatural sexual experiences and tossed them indiscriminately" into *Naked Lunch* (qtd. in Glass 118-9). His emphasis on the unnaturalness of Burroughs's sexual content suggests the galvanizing effects of explicit representations of nonnormative sexuality, representations that are responsible both for the legal scrutiny of *Naked Lunch* and, in a sense, its ultimate vindication. *Naked Lunch*'s long journey to publication and canonization—which culminated with the Massachusetts Supreme Court's reversal of the Boston ban in *Attorney General v. A Book Named Naked Lunch* (1966)—reflect the fluctuating literary and cultural landscape of the period. *Naked Lunch*'s exoneration essentially concluded the era of highly publicized obscenity trials and paved the way for sweeping social change; in doing so, *Naked Lunch* forever altered the role of nonnormative sexuality in America. *SM in Postmodern America* explores these changes not only in canonical literature, but in the broader cultural imaginary as well in order to understand how—in less than fifty years—sadoomasochism (henceforth

SM)¹ catapulted from the dusty pages of 19th-century sexology texts to the national stage. By studying the interrelatedness of SM representations in canonical postmodern fiction and their relationship to sexual and textual practices in queer SM communities, this project reimagines the significance and function of SM in literature and in life. The story of *Naked Lunch*'s publication, censorship, and vindication sets the stage for an era in which SM became a locus of artistic innovation, social transformation, subcultural formation, and political agitation.

After facing several initial rejections, excerpts of *Naked Lunch* were printed by the University of Chicago's literary magazine, *The Chicago Review*, in 1958; however, when a "Chicago reporter wrote an expository article condemning the *Review* for publishing obscene content" the University Chancellor told the *Review*'s editor, Irving Rosenthal, not to publish "anything that 'would offend a sixteen-year-old girl' (qtd. in Ciardi 22)" (Wilson 100). The censoring of Burroughs's work led Rosenthal to found a new journal, *Big Table*. Alongside work from Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, and Allen Ginsberg, the first issue of *Big Table* includes ten episodes from *Naked Lunch*. Though Rosenthal had neatly side-stepped the University Chancellor's informal censorship of

¹ A note on terminology: I use "SM" as a way of distancing the communities and practices I discuss from the terms "sadism" and "masochism," which carry pathologizing and clinical connotations given their coinage by 19th-century sexologist, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and their usage in subsequent medical and psychoanalytic discourse. "SM" was specifically chosen over the more contemporary acronym, BDSM, as a way of paying homage to the history of queer leather communities, which began the process of depathologizing sadism and masochism by shifting away from these terms and generally favoring "sadoomasochism" or "S/M." That BDSM has largely been taken up by pansexual organizations in recent years, informs my use of "SM" as a way to emphasize the queer origins of these communities. And finally, using "SM" without a dash, ampersand, or slash not only indicates the consensuality and mutuality valued amongst SM practitioners—which is what notably distinguishes SM from non-consensual sexual violence—but it also emphasizes the degree to which these practices go hand in hand. In the words of Larry Townsend, author of the influential *The Leatherman's Handbook* (1972), "SM more accurately defines us. To me the ampersand (&) implies a dichotomy" that is not reflective of the majority who are "switch-hitters, neither pure S nor pure M, but rather SM" (*The Leatherman's Handbook II* 10).

Burroughs, *Big Table* would not have the same luck. Deeming Kerouac's and Burroughs's pieces "obscene and filthy" the U.S. Postmaster for Chicago refused to accept *Big Table* for mailing and seized 400 copies, though Rosenthal sent the remaining copies of *Big Table* by road to San Francisco and New York where they quickly sold out.

Meanwhile, Rosenthal brought suit against Chicago's Postmaster in a case, *Big Table, Inc. v. Schroeder* (Chicago District Court, 1960), that ultimately found neither work obscene. The case is significant for its citation of *Roth v. United States* (1957), in which the Supreme Court had established a new federal precedent for determining obscenity—"whether to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material taken as a whole appeals to prurient interest" (qtd. in *Big Table v. Schroeder*)—which was cited by the presiding judge in the *Big Table* case, District Judge Julius J. Hoffman. The *Roth* decision maintained that obscenity was not legally protected by the Constitution's First Amendment, but it also departed significantly from historical definitions of obscenity. Prior to *Roth*, obscenity cases were largely decided by the "Hicklin Test," a precedent established in Britain in 1868 that defined obscenity as a work that—in whole or in part—can deprave or corrupt society's most vulnerable members. Although the New York District Court case—*United States v. A Book Entitled Ulysses* (1933)—introduced the idea that literature should be judged *as a whole* in terms of its effects on the *average* person, *Roth v. United States* established these requirements at the federal level along with the necessity of considering a work's redeeming social value.

In the case of *Big Table*, Judge Hoffman recognized how the *Roth* obscenity criteria “deman[d] a taxing analysis of both content and context since it is not merely the use of language or description unacceptable by contemporary community standards which is forbidden but the material must also be held capable of evoking a prurient interest” (*Big Table v. Schroeder*), adding that the legal precedent established by *Roth* is concerned with “the social effect of language” and not the “protection of liberalism under the guise of free speech” (*Big Table v. Schroeder*). With these standards in mind, Judge Hoffman determined that neither Kerouac’s nor Burroughs’s pieces met the legal definition of obscenity. More specifically, Judge Hoffman found that Burroughs’s work was entirely “unappealing to the prurient interest. The exacerbated, morbid, and perverted sex related by the author could not arouse a corresponding interest in the average reader” (*Big Table v. Schroeder*). Ironically, *Naked Lunch*’s first legal victory appears to be dependent upon both the degree and kind of its sexual content: that *Naked Lunch*’s pornographic material is largely concerned with excessive non-normativity might very well have saved it from censorship, since the court’s decision seems to imply that less perverse representations would have been of prurient appeal to the sexual tastes of the average man.

The controversy and seizure of *Big Table* prompted Maurice Girodias of Olympia Press in Paris to reconsider his rejection in Autumn 1957 of Burroughs’s work as “not racy enough” (Wilson 101). Largely a purveyor of “dirty books,” Girodias had found *Naked Lunch*’s initial manuscript “without commercial possibilities” since “the sexual content . . . was sparse. It was also largely homosexual. . . . And even the homosexual

passages were not particularly arousing” (De St. Jorre 240). Since its establishment in 1953, Olympia had become known for a “combination of high brow obscuratinism and pulp pornography” that dealt in classic erotica like Sade and Cleland; contemporary avant-garde work of the Beat movement; and various other authors whose work had been banned in the U.S., like Henry Miller. With the publicity of the *Big Table* trial and the journal’s immediate commercial success, Girodias saw a new opportunity in *Naked Lunch* that prompted him to write Allen Ginsberg and request that he resubmit Burroughs’s manuscript (De St. Jorre 241). Rushing the book to print, Girodias released *Naked Lunch* as No. 76 of Olympia’s Traveller’s Companion series, which at the time were “symbols of erotic and subversive material” (Wilson 102).

Olympia’s reputation as a pornographic publishing house specializing in the controversial would only continue to grow in later decades. To escape censorship measures instituted by Charles de Gaulle in France,² Girodias would move to New York by the late 1960s where he re-established Olympia Press. At that time, Girodias even added an additional pornographic imprint specializing in gay content, The Other Traveller’s series. By the early 1970s, The Other Traveller was publishing landmark texts that fundamentally altered the course of American sexual subcultures, like Larry Townsend’s *The Leatherman’s Handbook* (1972), which initiated the erotic “how-to” guidebook genre that has since become a mainstay of (gay) SM culture.

² In *Venus Bound*, John de St. Jorre explains Girodias’s deteriorating experience in France: Girodias was prosecuted both for current Olympia titles and “several [titles] that were out of print and even two or three books that he had not published at all. By the mid-1960s he had collected four to six years in suspended prison sentences, \$80,000 in fines, and an eighty-year ban on all publishing activity” (268).

Although Girodias marketed *Naked Lunch* as a book “with perhaps more literary merit than his usual publications” he also highlighted the book’s confiscation by American authorities and ultimately “pushed *Naked Lunch* as a DB (dirty book)” (Wilson 103-4). Unlike other Traveller’s Companion books, *Naked Lunch* was issued with a dust-jacket that included fairly substantial blurbs that sensationalized its obscene and forbidden content, including excerpts from an article by John Ciardi that both explained *Big Table*’s censorship and legitimized *Naked Lunch* as a literary masterpiece (Wilson 103). However, it would be this latter point that would frame *Naked Lunch*’s American release by Grove Press, a publishing house that brought European avant-garde fiction and drama to the U.S., as well as early Beat literature, classic erotica, and revolutionary literature of the New Left, Black Power, and Civil Rights movements. Under the stewardship of its president and owner, Barney Rossett, Grove Press became a symbol of the counterculture. Despite the many titles shared between Olympia and Grove, Girodias’s publicity tactics for *Naked Lunch* differed significantly from Barney Rossett’s; facing a far less permissive publishing culture in the U.S., Rossett decided to aggressively defend *Naked Lunch*’s literary merit and “mold positive reception” upon its release in 1962 (Wilson 110).

In November 1959, Rossett acquired the American rights to *Naked Lunch* from Girodias and quickly had 10,000 copies printed. However, they would spend years languishing in a warehouse while Rossett “had his back up against the wall defending *Tropic of Cancer* in lawsuits all over the United States” (De St. Jorre 249). Even Girodias’s desire for the book’s American royalties couldn’t sway Rossett to release the

book earlier. Given Rossett's multiple legal entanglements over the censorship and banning of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *The Tropic of Cancer* just prior to releasing *Naked Lunch* in 1962, it makes sense that Rossett would downplay the explicit sexual content of *Naked Lunch* and instead emphasize that it was meant to be "humorous and full of obvious satire" (Wilson 110). Rossett was so intent on averting legal issues by touting *Naked Lunch*'s literary qualities, that he even circulated a pamphlet with reviews by Terry Southern and E.S. Seldon³ to U.S. booksellers in advance of its American publication, so that he might "help booksellers understand what they are reading beyond dirty language and graphic scenes" (Wilson 109). Despite such efforts, the book still faced censorship—in both Los Angeles and Boston—and "proved to be a fantastically polarizing book in the popular press . . . the reception of *Naked Lunch* is always over shadowed by its reputation as a lewdly immoral and dangerously subversive text" (Wilson 112).



With portions of *Naked Lunch* initially published in the 1950s, the text emerges from a period that paradoxically saw both a liberalization and a contraction of American attitudes toward sexuality. Like the shifting landscape of American culture, which was marked by unpredictable and at times paradoxical attitudes toward sexuality, *Naked Lunch* epitomizes how the 1950s and early 60s were a time when "censorship laws and enforcement practices were constantly shifting and not always in predictable directions" (Meeker 98). Moreover, the 1950s were a watershed moment in American history that

³ A contributor for *Evergreen Review* (Wilson 109), Grove Press's literary magazine.

“recodif[ied] the relations of sexuality,” a period in which “the struggles that were fought leave a residue in the form of laws, social practices, and ideologies which then affect the way in which sexuality is experienced long after the immediate conflicts have faded” (Rubin, “Thinking Sex” 274).

On the one hand, the publication of Alfred Kinsey’s monumental studies of human sexuality—*Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953)—introduced Americans to the normalcy (or in Kinsey’s terms, “naturalness”) of non-normativity, which led to a “revelation of a wide divergence between ideals and actual behavior [that] alleviated the anxiety of many Americans about whether their own private habits set them apart from others” (D’Emilio Freedman 287). On the other hand, global political concerns during the Cold War gave rise to repressive federal government policies. The investigations conducted by the House Committee on Un-American Activities led to the Lavender Scare and “the labeling of homosexuals as moral perverts and national security risks” (D’Emilio & Freedman 293), which encouraged the increased harassment of gays and lesbians by local police forces (D’Emilio & Freedman 293). This increased harassment on the local level extended to include “vendors of homophile magazines” as well (Meeker 98).

As the decade wore on, the government began to roll back its censorship of obscenity, expanding the scope of what could be published, sold, and mailed. What began with the battle over *Howl* in San Francisco in 1957, which “commenced a nationwide movement for writers’ free speech rights to so-called obscene and subversive utterances” (Herman and Weisenburger 205-6), was brought full circle with Allen Ginsberg’s

testimony for *Naked Lunch* in the Boston case that ended the era of the obscenity show trial. However, between these two state-level obscenity decisions we also find cases such as *One, Inc. v. Olesen* (1958) in which the Supreme Court overturned two lower courts' rulings about *ONE: The Homosexual Magazine*. In doing so, the Court ruled that homosexual content was not de facto obscene. Given that *ONE* was founded in 1953 by men and women from a Mattachine Society discussion group in Los Angeles, it should come as no surprise that its material was primarily political in nature and rarely of prurient appeal.⁴ In its first year, *ONE*'s sales quickly "passed 2,000 copies per month, with a readership substantially larger than that" (D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics* 73), despite the fact that by 1955 licensed newsstands in New York City were prohibited from selling the magazine (Meeker 50).

On the balance, victories like *ONE*'s signaled the government's decreasing interest in regulating obscenity at the federal level; indeed, by the mid-1960s obscenity matters were largely being decided in state courts, like with *Naked Lunch*. In many ways, *Naked Lunch*'s impact—effectively "push[ing] the boundary of obscenity/pornography law deep into wilderness territory" (Herman and Weisenburger 73)—legitimated work that had previously been considered obscene. In doing so, the *Attorney General v. A Book Named Naked Lunch* decision effectively set a baseline condition that allowed explicit material of all sorts to find its way into print: "although we are not bound by the opinions of others concerning the book [*Naked Lunch*], we cannot ignore the serious acceptance of

⁴ Begun in late 1950, The Mattachine Society was the first homophile organization in the country. Its founders' leftist political experience with the Communist party not only led to the organization's initial emphasis on viewing homosexuals as an oppressed minority, but it also influenced the organization's "secret, cell-like structure that, by protecting members from exposure, allowed them to participate with relative safety in a gay organization" (D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics* 58).

it by so many persons in the literary community. Hence, we cannot say that ‘Naked Lunch’ has no ‘redeeming social importance in the hands of those who publish or distribute it on the basis of that value’” (*Attorney General v. A Book Named Naked Lunch*). Indeed, Rossett’s reflections on his legal battles underscore the shifting cultural and legal perceptions of obscenity and how these cases opened up the sphere of artistic expression and literary merit:

When we published *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* it was denounced as a wicked, perverse, terrible, degrading work, etc. etc. Then when we published *Tropic of Cancer* we were told that *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* was a fine book of creative merit but that with *Tropic of Cancer* we had gone beyond the bounds of decency, that it was a corrupt, perverse mess. And now, with *Naked Lunch* we go to court and are told that *Tropic of Cancer* is a brilliant work of great merit, a modern classic, etc. etc. It is only *Naked Lunch* that is a bad book. Somehow I imagine the day when *Naked Lunch* will be the modern classic and it will be yet something else which will be beyond the bounds of decency. (*Obscene* [2007], Dir. Neil Ortenberg)

As Rossett observes above, explicit sexual representations in “high” literature—with their broader circulation, greater cultural cachet, and the elevated discourse surrounding such texts (i.e. academic criticism, mainstream publishers’ advertising, *New York Times* book reviews, Pulitzer Prize nominations, etc.)—constitute a distinct shift in American culture and reading practices. Such shifts can at least partially be attributed to the landmark ruling over *Naked Lunch* in Massachusetts, since as a result of *Attorney General v. A*

Book Named Naked Lunch “the legal question of obscenity after 1966 no longer concerned works of literature” (Goodman 247, quoted in Wilson 112). Thus, the new federal requirement to consider a work’s redeeming social value, made pornographic representations an object of serious legal, social, and cultural consideration for the first time, and as a consequence we find increasingly explicit representations in the work of canonical authors, as well as in “low” cultural forms.

As D’Emilio and Freedman have observed, this was a period in which the effects of the Warren Court’s decisions on mainstream media were acutely felt, and “pornographic books, magazines, and films proliferated, with their sexual content growing ‘progressively stronger’” (287-8). These changes from the mid- to late-1960s coincided with a new national interest in sexual non-normativity and underground culture; “literally countless putatively nonfiction paperback studies of male and female homosexuality [were] published” (Meeker 145). The appeal of the underground extended to mainstream magazines as well. In June 1964, *Life* magazine ran an extensive story entitled “Homosexuality in America.” Significantly, the *Life* story opened with a two-page photo-spread of the Tool Box in San Francisco, a bar catering to the SM and leather crowd. Not only did this image bring masculine homosexuality and its sadomasochistic/cruising erotics to national attention—the issue sold 7,288,348 copies (Meeker 288n3)—but it presented San Francisco “in an unprecedented light[,] . . . possess[ing] a diverse and flourishing gay nightlife where sexual partners, friends, and maybe even lovers might be found; and it was a city where . . . homosexuals owned small businesses and ran organizations for the benefit of other homosexuals” (Meeker 165).

Perhaps even more significant in *Life*'s representation of San Francisco was the absence of homophobia, police harassment, sex crime, and alienation—all of which, Meeker observes, were presented rather strategically in the article's coverage of homosexual life in New York and Los Angeles (165). Thus, "Homosexuality in America" revised the image of San Francisco as a bastion of liberal thought and action so that it became a symbol of erotic—and specifically homosexual—freedom as well, even more so than it had been previously. Both the *Life* story and the new popularity of sociological paperbacks on underground gay and lesbian life were part of a veritable explosion of mainstream media interest in homosexuality, with "more stories about homosexuality appear[ing] in 1964 than in the previous three years combined" (Meeker 288n6).

In more general terms, "popular novels, mass-circulation magazines, metropolitan newspapers, Hollywood films, and even television, the family's entertainer, rushed to take advantage of the new liberal climate sanctioned by the courts" (D'Emilio and Freedman 287-8). The effects of the new liberal climate meant that "dirty book" material became commonplace not only in film and TV, but in serious literature as well: in the 1960s, Grove published sexually explicit texts like Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1964), in addition to "embrac[ing] . . . gay male writers and readers, publishing Spicer, O'Hara, Ginsberg, and many other openly gay authors in the *Evergreen Review*" (Glass 125). Of particular importance was Grove's "fastest-selling novel ever," John Rechy's *City of Night* (1963), "a landmark in publishing," which "la[y] the groundwork for the emergence of gay literature as a lucrative market niche" (Glass 126). In *Counterculture Colophon*, Loren Glass explains how Rechy "didn't want the jacket copy

to categorize [*City of Night*] as a ‘homosexual novel,’” and how Rechy instead suggested “‘sexual underworld’ or ‘sexual underground’” (126). Significantly, Glass explains how Rechy’s comments “illustrate the appeal of the underground as a cultural region in which such distinctions are less important” and how “Grove exploited these connotations of the term ‘underground’ quite successfully in the later 1960s” (126).⁵

The expansion of this market niche made it possible for other tales of the “underground” to make their way into the world and gain—even briefly—national attention. For instance, in 1968 Putnam published William Carney’s *The Real Thing*, an epistolary novel marketed as “a literary and psychological tour de force that presents the other side of *The Story of O*” (“1968 Publicity” BANC MSS 2001/72c 8:24). Though not widely popular with mainstream audiences at the time,⁶ it is a historically important text: not only did it document nascent gay leather culture, but it did so from the perspective of an author who was himself active in that scene. This is especially significant since early leather culture was far more underground than its homophile counterparts. While homophile organizations of the 1950s, like the Mattachine Society and the lesbian organization The Daughters of Bilitis (f. 1955, San Francisco) sought to legitimize homosexuality in American culture through assimilationist tactics, the men of the early

⁵ Indeed, Grove Press’s *Evergreen Review* began including stickers with the magazine that read “Join the Underground,” which turned into something of a guerilla marketing campaign; John Waters recalls finding stickers in bars, on the street, and in bathrooms (*Obscene* [2007], Dir. Neil Ortenberg).

⁶ The *Kirkus Reviews* finds Carney’s novel to inspire “little more than a yawn. A cocktail conversation piece for the switch-ed on set” (February 15, 1968, 201). According to Carney in a 1977 letter sent to a British publisher, *The Real Thing*’s “abysmal showing when it first came out” is Putnam’s fault since they had “planned big publicity and promotion, but lost interest in it even before the publication date” (“Correspondence 19 Jan 1970-12 March 1981” BANC MSS 2001/72c 8:23). However, the book slowly gained a following amongst queer leatherfolk and, by the late 70s, enjoyed “a substantial underground reputation. A copy of it, when book searchers can find one, commands up to twice the price it cost when it first appeared” (“Correspondence 19 Jan 1970-12 March 1981” BANC MSS 2001/72c 8:23).

gay leather scene—brought together by an interest in masculinity, motorcycles, and SM or rough sex—were loath to put anything in writing. In the words of Carney’s narrator, “I do not like putting such things as we are to discuss in writing; this work is largely handed on through oral and experiential traditions” (20). Written just after the relaxation of obscenity laws and just prior to Townsend’s *The Leatherman’s Handbook* and the proliferation of practitioner-produced SM texts and magazines in its wake, Carney could not anticipate the degree to which the social and sexual life of gay leather culture would transform.

The mid-1960s was also a period in which the consumer habits and suburban lifestyle that had been the backbone of post-WWII American prosperity began to decline, a topic that often became the focus of explicit postmodernist fiction, like Robert Coover’s, which offers a hellish deconstruction of suburban life. At the same time, we find a rise in youth cultures espousing disillusionment with American values on multiple fronts—such critiques were variously framed through identitarian, anti-War, and countercultural rhetorics, and often all three. In addition to new forms of expression in the arts and the expansion of pornography and the commercial sex industry in the 1970s, the government’s decreasing interest in prosecuting obscenity also enabled new forms of community, networking, and activism. For instance, de-regulation of mailable matter allowed for the growth of subscription based personal ads services catering to specific sexual niches, like *The Rigid Bondage Roster*, which offered SM personals for men and women, and, by 1972, the *SMad*, an exclusively gay SM personals service. The ability to

make anonymous, sexual contact through the mail precipitated a decline in leather culture's exclusionary, underground nature.

American understandings and attitudes towards sexuality continued to shift over the next decades, as the intertwining of media and sexuality increased. By continuing to “publish sexually explicit materials, frequently in association with the newly legitimate pornographic film industry” Grove Press “continued to work the niches it had established for itself in the 1950s and 1960s” (Glass 214) with various types of sexually explicit fiction, ranging from *The Marquis de Sade: The Complete Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and Other Writings* (1965), Jean Genet's *Funeral Rites* (1969), Pauline Réage's *Story of O* (1965), to postmodern works like Robert Coover's *Pricksongs & Descants* (1966). Indeed, this brief list of some of Grove's more popular texts suggests the prevalence of sadomasochistic content in literature published in this period. Similar leanings can be found in “low” cultural forms as well, like popular media and music. For example, promotional media for The Rolling Stones's 1976 album, *Black and Blue*, included a 14 x 48 foot billboard above the Sunset Strip featuring a bound and visibly bruised woman next to text that read “I'm ‘Black and Blue’ from The Rolling Stones—and I love it!”. While popular music of the time was saturated with sadomasochistic valences—think, the Velvet Underground's⁷ song “Venus in Furs” (1967) or Frank Zappa's “Bobby Brown” (1979), to name only two—I mention the *Black and Blue*

⁷ That the Velvet Underground took their name from Michael Leigh's *The Velvet Underground* (1963), a non-fiction exposé about non-normative sexual practices in the U.S.—including sadomasochism, homosexuality, and suburban swingers—further reflects the growing prevalence of sexual nonnormativity in the American cultural imaginary, and in popular culture particularly.

billboard specifically because it became the subject of extensive grass roots campaigns by Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW).

The saturation of American culture with sexual explicitness across all media forms, coincided with a new national awareness surrounding gay and lesbian rights that grew out of visible gay and lesbian activism and the formation of the Gay Liberation Front immediately following the Stonewall Uprising in the summer of 1969 and the Gay Activists Alliance at the end of the same year; the 1973 decision of the American Psychiatric Organization to remove homosexuality from its list of pathologies; and the election of openly gay officials, like Harvey Milk in San Francisco. Despite the newly prominent role of sexuality in the public sphere and a hesitantly growing acceptance of sexual diversity, which tended to increase over the course of the 1970s and 80s, it's important to emphasize how "the history of American sexuality . . . is not one of progress from repression to liberation, ignorance to wisdom, or enslavement to freedom" (D'Emilio & Freedman x). Even while gays and lesbians increasingly gained acceptance and society as a whole became more accustomed to explicit representations, the galvanizing effects of sexual nonnormativity persisted. For instance, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (Viking, 1973) was denied the Pulitzer award for fiction in 1974, largely—it is presumed—for the graphic nature of its homosexual, sadomasochistic content.

By the end of the 1970s, American attitudes towards sexuality, its representations, and sexual diversity had again become extremely polarized on every level of society. We begin to see reactionary movements on local, state, and federal levels. The political gains

of the gay and lesbian movement and its new visibility were met with a conservative backlash that manifested in Anita Bryant's successful "Save Our Children" campaign (1977) to repeal gay rights in Dade County, FL; the controversy over California's Proposition 6 (The Brigg's Initiative, 1978) to prohibit gays and lesbians from working in public schools; the assassination of San Francisco City Supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone by Dan White in 1978; and by the 1980s the federal government's protracted silence and inaction over AIDS during the Reagan administration. While the AIDS epidemic led to a return of repressive policies toward lesbian and gay communities with harassment on both the local and national levels, it was also a time when SM became especially controversial amongst various lesbian, gay, and feminist factions, in addition to the New Right.

In part a legacy of the 1970s' growing commercial sex industry and in part a result of technological innovations that allowed for an unprecedented accessibility to pornography in American homes via the videocassette, the 1980s both began and ended with national controversies over censorship and pornography, including, gay and lesbian protests against the 1981 release of William Friedkin's film *Cruising*, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon's 1983 anti-pornography ordinance in Minnesota, the 1985 Meese Commission that Reagan convened to study pornography's deleterious effects, and Senator Jesse Helms's attempts to cut NEA funding during the national controversy over Robert Mapplethorpe's exhibition *The Perfect Moment* (1989); in one way or another, each of these controversies were animated by the threat of sexual nonnormativity, the emblem of which had become SM. Renewed anxieties over sex and

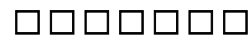
sexuality were not the sole purview of the New Right but were occurring amongst activists and academics as well, albeit with a different focus. The increasingly splintered interests amongst straight and lesbian feminists over sexual orientation, identity, and sexual practices ignited a series of heated battles over the politics of desire, collectively known as the sex wars. The visibility of sexually explicit material in the public sphere, coupled with feminists' initial successes in making violence against women an issue of national concern in the late 1970s, contributed to the rise of a new brand of feminism that was vocally opposed to sex work, pornography, and—as the apotheosis of commercialized violence against women—sadoomasochism in particular. The anti-pornography feminist movement encompassed a variety of feminist anti-porn, anti-SM, and anti-violence factions. The movement drew national attention through protest tours of red-light districts, “Take Back the Night” marches, and the formation of activist organizations with prominent feminist members, like San Francisco’s Women Against Violence and Pornography in the Media (WAVPM) founded in 1977 and New York’s Women Against Pornography founded in 1978.

Feminist critiques of pornography and of sexual practices that did not conform to utopic, essentialist notions of female desire, led to a vocal counter-movement of lesbian and feminist activism, as pro-sex or “radical pervert” women with a variety of political and sexual interests banded together to defend free speech and sexual diversity. In San Francisco in 1978 Gayle Rubin, Patrick (then Pat) Califia, and other women (who chose

to remain anonymous) founded Samois,⁸ the first lesbian SM political organization in the country. Samois served as a model for subsequent organizations that cropped up across the country, such as the Lesbian Sex Mafia (New York City 1981), Briar Rose (Columbus, OH 1985), The Outer Limits (Seattle, WA 1988), and Female Trouble (Philadelphia, PA 1990)—to name a few. Pro-sex lesbians also began producing their own media, like the lesbian erotica magazine *On Our Backs* (San Francisco, 1984-2006)—its title a humorous jab at the radical (and largely anti-porn) feminist periodical *off our backs* (Washington, D.C., 1970-2008). As Ummni Khan observes, the sex wars themselves led to “an incitement to sexual discourse. Having a ‘war’ allowed all participants to continually be engaged in heated sexual dialogue” (55), which frequently took place at (protests of) anti-pornography conferences and feminist book collectives that had refused to sell pro-SM texts, like those produced by Samois. The effects of the sex wars bled into literature and academia as well, as evidenced by extensive scholarly debates around Réage’s *Story of O* and by Grove Press’s publication of Kathy Acker’s experimental fiction, which was known for its aggressively anti-narrative qualities and its explicit—often sadomasochistic—sexual representations. While the government had stopped policing such material decades before, the sex wars ironically led to a new form of censorship from the opposite direction. In an interview with Acker, Sylvère Lotringer asks about women’s groups that “were pretty hostile during a tour [Acker] made in California” (“Devoured By Myths (Interview)” 18), and Acker clarifies how her “interest in the nexus of sexuality and politics . . . was anathema” to the “old feminists”

⁸ The organization takes its name from *Story of O* in which part of O’s training occurs under the guidance of Anne-Marie at Samois.

(“Devoured By Myths (Interview)” 19). While SM remained highly contested, the proliferation of sexual discourses during the sex wars also generated an increased cultural awareness about stigmatized sexual practices that allowed SM to become part of the national conversation in new ways.



By making visible the rise of SM in the American cultural imaginary, this brief history offers one way of chronicling social, cultural, and political changes in the last half of the twentieth century, linking disparate histories and artistic movements through a shared preoccupation with SM. Certainly, it is no coincidence that Acker’s work would join the ranks of controversial, sexually explicit material put out by Grove Press, and it is easy to trace a direct line from the landmark decision regarding *Naked Lunch*—after which the legal question of obscenity no longer concerned works of literature (Wilson 112)—to Acker’s novels. In more than legal ways, Acker’s texts and their literary heritage are indebted to the censorship battles won by Grove in the 60s—as evidenced by her significant intertextual references to Sade, Genet, and Burroughs, like those in *Don Quixote* (Grove, 1986). Moreover, the freedoms won by Grove made possible new modes of expression across American culture that catalyzed both the 1970s’ boom in commercialized sex, which has been read as a “marketplace manifestation of the sexual revolution” of the 1960s (Bronstein 65) and the formation of sexual subcultures. Specifically, the publication of SM guidebooks, magazines, and pornography enabled the development of leather communities on the cultural margins, while the growth of the commercial sex industry arrived on the national stage with the “Pubic Wars,” when from

1971-1972 *Playboy*'s Hugh Hefner and *Penthouse*'s Bob Guccione “push[ed] each other toward greater sexual explicitness” (Bronstein 69). In turn, these parallel developments animated the sex wars, which, along with the “family values” espoused by the New Right, brought America's fascination with SM to its zenith in the 1980s. That these myriad shifts were precipitated by the exoneration of *Naked Lunch*—a text made infamous by its homosexual and sadomasochistic content—is deeply significant. In crossing a cultural and legal threshold, *Naked Lunch* heralded a new era that was in many ways defined by a growing cultural fascination with sadomasochism in both high and low art.

It is this growing fascination with SM across American culture that my project takes as its subject. *SM in Postmodern America*, covers roughly four decades of cultural and literary production, examining the rise of sexually explicit—in particular sadomasochistic—representations in two fields that have traditionally been kept separate: postmodern American fiction and the texts produced by and for queer SM communities. Through historical research, deep archival work, and literary analysis this project intervenes in both queer theory and postmodern criticism. Studying the memoirs, essays, pornography, and guidebooks produced by and for queer SM practitioners reveals a new critical optic that makes visible the pleasures of postmodern SM representations and their relation to queer embodied practices. In doing so, *SM in Postmodern America* counters the desexualization of SM in postmodern criticism, as well as the prevailing association of SM with the antirelational turn in queer theory.

This undertaking is guided by Michel Foucault's thoughts on the positive potential of sexual identity, a statement that seems to contradict many of the ways in which Foucault's work has been taken up in subsequent scholarship. I will argue that the frequent use of Foucault as a basis for rejecting identity categories tout court elides his significant work on the formation of identities around pleasures (as opposed to sexual object choice). Reading Foucault's later work, particularly his discussions on SM, like "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity," reveals how Foucault sees the productive potential of sexual identity as "a creative force" (383). Additionally, his work on techniques of self in *Ethics* links narrative activity with the formation of subjectivity, which becomes key to the positive-productive SM theory this project develops. Foucault's idea of SM as a creative force leaves substantial leeway to explore a multiplicity of sexual and textual practices associated with the leather movement. Along with Foucault, other pro-SM work by queer theorists (and SM practitioners) within the academy emphasizes innovation as the predominant basis for SM subculture.⁹ For instance, in an interview with Amber Hollibaugh and Jewelle Gomez, Gayle Rubin discusses how her earliest encounters with gay male culture in the late 1970s expanded her "notions of the possibilities and semantic arrangements for different kinds of desires and roles" ("Another Place to Breathe" 145-6). More specifically, Rubin explains how "in leather and S/M communities there is a lot of communication about sex . . . because the things that are sexualized are so much more numerous and varied than genitals and bodies" ("Another Place to Breathe" 154), which facilitates the transmission of

⁹ As opposed to the over-frequent assumption that the leather movement is about "the uncovering of S/M tendencies deep within our unconscious" (Foucault, "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity" 384). See also Foucault's citation of Gayle Rubin in this interview (384).

knowledge, practices, and pleasures across lines of gender and sexuality. In addition to Rubin's academic work, my methodology also draws from the theories presented about SM erotics and community in my objects of study—practitioner-produced mixed-genre texts and pornography—both of which constitute significant, but overlooked, sources of queer theory.

For Foucault, forming identities around sexual practices, like SM, is productive if we conceive of identity as a game, “a procedure to have relations, social and sexual-pleasure relationships that create new friendships . . . is useful” (“Sex, Power” 385). Identity ceases to be productive and becomes problematic when it is limiting or disciplinary (i.e. when it is viewed as an “ethical universal rule” [“Sex, Power” 385]). Significantly, Foucault sees members of SM subcultures as “inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body—through the eroticization of the body. I think it's a kind of creating, a creative enterprise” (“Sex, Power” 384). Because gay men engaged in SM are also engaging in the creative process of finding new pleasures and relations with their bodies, Foucault cites the “S/M ghetto in San Francisco” as “a good example of a community that has experimented with, and formed an identity around, pleasure” (“Sex, Power” 385).

While Foucault's primary argument for SM as a creative force was rooted in the desexualization of pleasure, or rather the potential for embodied pleasures that exceed genital stimulation, this dissertation assumes that a broader creative potential was implicit in Foucault's brief discussions of SM. It asks specifically, What was produced out of SM's creative potential? Where did the SM communities Foucault discusses originate

from? What became of them in later years? And how do they fit in with the broader history of the post-WWII era and the literature of that period?

Some recent scholarship has rejected “Foucault’s glorification of San Francisco’s SM ‘laboratories of sexual experimentation’” (Weiss 6). For instance, Margot Weiss’s early 2000s study of pansexual BDSM communities in the Bay Area argues that SM has become “deeply tied to capitalist cultural formations” (6), which makes SM complicit with “the social relations that demand efficiency and productivity from worker-subjects . . . producing bodies in line with new technologies of knowledge and power” (139). For Weiss, SM has become fully imbricated in the social and economic hierarchies of neoliberal capital (139), which leads to her conclusion that “SM subjectivity produces and is produced by the market for SM toys and paraphernalia” (Weiss 120). However, returning to the origins of contemporary SM culture and examining the sexual, textual, and social practices of gay, lesbian, and queer SM communities since their development in the 1940s tells quite a different story, one in which SM identity and SM pleasure are produced by and productive of narrative.



In order to understand how writing and narrative became key to the formation of queer SM subcultures and their embodied pleasures, it is necessary to understand how SM subcultures developed in a variety of demographics in different historical moments and geographic locations across the U.S., and to chart how, “from the 1960s through the 1980s, the change was one of increasing organization and cohesion, lessening secrecy, and improving networks over ever-increasing geography” (Bean, *Leathersex* 194).

Despite this seeming narrative of progress, my exploration of narrative's relationship to SM is not primarily interested in reifying existing approaches to periodizing leather history—which often, as the previous quotation suggests, adopt a narrative of progress—and is instead invested in identifying key epistemic shifts in queer SM communities for what they reveal about SM's significance and function in queer life.

Many leatherfolk (erroneously or not) express a deep nostalgia for how leather “used to be” in a period that is sometimes named that of the “Old Guard,” which refers to “the earliest set of habits that jelled by the mid-to late 1950s in the men's leather community here in the U.S.” and from which “the modern leather scene as we now know it first formalized itself out of the group of men who were soldiers returning home after World War II (1939-1945)” (Baldwin, *Ties That Bind* 107). Though “the Old Guard is *relatively* well-defined” as the exclusive, military-inspired, protocol-heavy style of SM sociality and sex that characterized gay male leather practices following World War II, I will steer away from this specific term because “there is often a lot of unwarranted emotional baggage dropped on it” (Bean, *Leathersex* 194). Additionally, “Old Guard” often functions as a kind of straw-man that merely denotes a leather culture that is not reflective of contemporary styles; “many people today regard just about everything before the 1980s as ‘Old Guard,’” even though, by the 1980s “leather/SM had already undergone several social revolutions and ‘Old Guard’ had already had several ‘New Guards’” (Rubin, “Old Guard, New Guard” n.p.). Most importantly, the presumption that the Old Guard's defining feature was its emphasis on rigid protocol not only overlooks how “Old Guard customs were nowhere nearly as numerous or elaborated as today's

protocols have become in some parts of the nation” (Baldwin, “The Leather Restoration” 6), but it also obscures more nuanced distinctions amongst the various periods of leather cultural development in the U.S.—distinctions that will become key to my own analysis.

This is not to say that leather culture has remained unchanged since the 1950s. As mentioned earlier, the relaxation of obscenity laws made new modes of communication and socialization possible on a national level, in addition to enabling the concomitant explosion of gay and lesbian SM texts from the 1970s onward. As a result, there has been an obvious increase in the visibility of leather, accompanied by a proliferation of lesbian, queer, and, more recently, pansexual leather cultures and communities. The types and the importance of leather social institutions have also changed, like when gay motorcycle clubs gave way to the leather bar as the primary social institution for gay leathermen, or the rise of the title system¹⁰ in the late 1970s, which proliferated and “then mutated” in the 1980s, shifting from “mostly recreational events [when] very little was expected of early winners” to title-holders becoming “community leaders and functionaries” in the mid-to-late 1980s (Rubin and Mesli, *Ashgate* 302).

In contrast to the “Old Guard/New Guard” binary, Gayle Rubin suggests a more nuanced approach to historical periodization, distinguishing amongst “formative, classic, and post-classic” leather periods (Rubin, “Sites, Settlements” 72). For Rubin, the “formative” period immediately follows World War II when homosexual leather culture began to coalesce amongst masculine gay men united either by their military experience during WWII and/or a shared interest in motorcycles. The “classic” period, also called

¹⁰ According to Rubin and Mesli “a system of leather ‘titles’ had emerged in the late 1970s, particularly with the founding of International Mr. Leather and Mr. Drummer” (302), which began in Chicago in 1979 and in San Francisco in 1981, respectively.

the “golden age” (Rubin, “Old Guard, New Guard” n.p.) is defined by an increased visibility of leather culture and the proliferation of leather-oriented social institutions amongst gay men in the 1970s, while the “post-classic” period begins in the late 1970s with the development of a distinct lesbian SM subculture and a shift toward pansexual SM consciousness by the 1990s (Rubin and Mesli, *Ashgate* 292). Rubin’s anthropological and geographic work on leather culture is instrumental for understanding leather subcultures and their relation to shifting urban geographies, as well as the development of and changes in SM politics; however, my focus on SM cultural productions and authors’ archival materials suggests a different approach to periodization, namely one defined by the epistemic shifts leather culture has undergone since WWII. This approach not only reveals a direct relation between queer community development and SM narrative, but it also suggests more generally how SM itself is reliant on narrative.

In particular, my project concentrates on the paradigm shifts leather subcultures underwent in relation to the accessibility of and procedures for producing, disseminating, and transmitting knowledge, exploring how, by the end of the 20th century, leather culture arrives at a moment in which “there is lots of information available about any erotic activity you care to name, and easy ways to get it. That was not true in 1965 when the Old Guard was into secrets” (Baldwin, *Ties That Bind* 141). Significantly, these epistemic paradigm shifts in leather culture correspond with its increased institutionalization, a change that is evocative of Foucault’s descriptions of early shifts in technologies of self, how “in traditional political life, oral culture was largely dominant. . . Yet the development of the administrative structures and the bureaucracy of the

imperial period increased the amount and role of writing in the political sphere” (“Technologies of Self” 232). In many ways, such changes are descriptive of leather culture’s transition from an oral tradition to a textual one. Furthermore, the ascendancy of SM texts and their role in disseminating knowledge and building an increasingly visible leather culture, cemented SM’s symbiotic relation to narrative production.

Following WWII, knowledge transmission amongst early leathersmen relied almost exclusively on interpersonal, oral communication that took place in casual social exchanges and in one-on-one or group sexual contacts—which often occurred at invite-only private parties or in the emerging leather bar scene in New York and later in San Francisco. In these spaces, leathersmen created erotic, instructional contexts that both ensured the existence of an SM community and maintained its exclusivity. This very early period was defined by “private parties and informal networks. These networks achieved a new level of institutional coherence by the mid-1950s with the emergence of leather bars and gay motorcycle clubs” (Rubin, “Sites, Settlements” 67). Leather bars, according to Baldwin, developed when gay “bike clubs made it their habit to hang out at a favored watering hole . . . in almost all cases, it was the bike clubs that created the first wave of leather bars and not the reverse” (“The Leather Restoration” 4). During this period and into the mid-1960s, access to leather culture began with socializing amongst core leathersmen in a particular region, followed by “a period of time during which that core group tried to find out if the guy had ‘the right stuff’” (“The Leather Restoration” 3); when and if they determined “that a candidate had the ‘right stuff’ he began to receive invitations to social events outside the bar atmosphere—back yard bar-b-ques [sic],

weekend football on TV, outings to the movies, amusement parks, dinner parties, holiday gatherings, and such. Homes thus became open to newcomers who craved access to the rich knowledge and experience base, which only the core-group possessed” (Baldwin, “The Leather Restoration” 4).

As Baldwin’s recollections indicate, secrecy and exclusivity were some of the defining features in early gay male leather culture—so much so, that this period’s sexual and cultural knowledge transmission practices can be likened to Foucault’s “ars erotica,” a tradition in which only the master “can transmit this art in an esoteric manner and as the culmination of an initiation in which he guides the disciples’ progress with unfailing skill and severity” (*History* 57). Like the master and disciple system that characterizes an “ars erotica,” early leather culture relied on a system of apprenticeship wherein SM “folk technology” was passed from “older and more experienced members to neophytes” (Rubin, *Coming to Power* 205), a time when “somasochism was a great adventure, a place where a young man could find mentors to show him the ways” (Preston, *My Life* 129). In very conscious ways, these knowledge circulation practices were limited by leathermen’s tendency to be “ex-clusive rather than in-clusive, meaning that the people in the scene understood the rules and tried to keep outsiders out” (Baldwin, *Ties That Bind* 110); significantly, “men in the scene do not discuss (or write about!) the scene with outsiders” (Baldwin, *Ties That Bind* 113). During this early period, David Stein¹¹ observes how “S/M was what went on behind closed doors; outside, it was discussed in whispers or code. . . . Plenty was going on, as I know now, but you had to be invited to

¹¹ David Stein co-founded the Gay Male S/M Activists in 1980 and many have attributed the guiding principle of contemporary SM, “safe, sane, and consensual” to his writing.

the party. . . . You couldn't talk your way in. . . . To admit your inexperience was to insure that you'd never get experience . . . Catch-69" (*Leatherfolk* 144). Leathermen's resistance to documenting their culture evokes how in the "ars erotica" "there is formed a knowledge that must remain secret, not because of an element of infamy that might attach to its object, but because of the need to hold it in the greatest reserve, since . . . it would lose its effectiveness and its virtue by being divulged" (Foucault, *History* 57).

However, this secrecy would soon change, partially due to how, by "the 1970s, specialized gay SM institutions began to proliferate" (Rubin and Mesli, *Ashgate* 292), but even more as the result of a publishing boom of gay SM texts which gave rise to new modes of accessing gay leather traditions. Men would no longer have to undergo an extended period of scrutiny before gaining even the most basic SM knowledge, and women suddenly had access to a wealth of sexual and social knowledge that had previously been almost the exclusive purview of gay men.¹² From early gay leather fiction by Townsend, Fritscher, and Steward; single or double issue magazine runs from "publishers like Bob Mizer with *Physique Pictorial* at AMG in LA, and Chuck Renslow with *Raw* at Kris Studio in Chicago" in 1972; through Townsend's *The Leatherman's Handbook* in 1972; to "a one-time leather photography magazine produced out of San Francisco called *Whipcrack*" by Fritscher (Townsend, "Who Lit Up" 77); and then finally, the first issue of *Drummer* magazine in 1975, which quickly became a pillar of gay leather lifestyle.

¹² There were however, brave exceptions to the male-dominated arena of established leather bars. In her lecture, "Valley of The Kings" Rubin recalls a lesbian couple in San Francisco that cruised gay leather bars in the 60s, and Linnea Due's essay "Blackbeard Lost" discusses her early experiences navigating the male world of leather.

The loosening of legal constraints on the publication and circulation of gay themed material, and erotic material more generally, also affected how leathermen exchanged knowledge and how they socialized nationwide. While magazines provided a new context for SM contacts through personal ads, the government's decreasing interest in policing obscenity also meant a new freedom to communicate through the mail, which gave rise to SM network/roster businesses—subscription-based, printed directories for gay SM men that became just as important as more traditional methods of gay leather cruising. Townsend observes that “once the postal authorities stopped hassling people for putting these things in the mail then you had all kinds of things out of these little organizations. You had the rigid Bondage Roster started in New York and Smads [sic], a little later. They wouldn't dare put those in the mail in like 1970 but by 1975 they were all over the place,” and once such organizations got going, “they didn't have the regional word-of-mouth things anymore” (Townsend, “Interview” 4).

The freedom to communicate via mail without fear of censorship, along with the publication of instructional texts like Townsend's gave rise to the transmission of detailed technical knowledge through correspondence. Indeed, Townsend even invites this practice in his *Handbook's* introduction: “Although I am already in touch with a great many ‘leather fans’ across the United States, Canada and Europe, I am always eager to hear from more. Especially if you feel I have erred along the way, tell me about it and your ideas may be reflected in some future work, or (assuming you guys buy out this *Handbook*) in a later, revised edition” (*Handbook* 3). Past is the time when traditional leathermen, like Carney's narrator, were resistant to recording sexual knowledge; instead,

one finds a wealth of correspondence in Townsend's archive of men writing from around the world to eagerly share their knowledge, some of which would be included in the sequel to the *Handbook*, *The Leatherman's Handbook II* (1983).

It was also during this period that SM social and political organizations began to form, such as, The Eulenspiegel Society (TES) in New York in 1971 and The Society of Janus in 1974 in San Francisco, both of which still exist today. TES, which was founded on the principles of 1960s identity politics and essentially "laid the foundations for political SM," began with a 1970 advertisement in *Screw* magazine placed by Pat Bond (Rubin and Mesli, *Ashgate* 293). While TES was initially for gay, male masochists, "in August 1971, members decided to include sadists" and in those early years TES "sought to bring together practitioners across boundaries of gender and sexual orientation," although gay men continued to comprise fifty percent of the group (Rubin and Mesli, *Ashgate* 293). In contrast, Janus, founded by Cynthia Slater and Larry Olsen, "grew primarily out of Slater's dissatisfaction with the possibilities available at the time to SM women," like professionally oriented clubs that "catered to an exclusively heterosexual clientele, and did not offer the possibilities for the kind of community for which Slater was looking" (Rubin and Mesli, *Ashgate* 295). From the beginning, Janus was a mixed-gender group that served gay male leathermen, professional dominatrixes, and lesbians. While a number of leathermen, like Guy Baldwin and Jim Kane, were involved early on, Janus was uniquely defined by the professional dominatrixes in the group who "generously shared their skills and . . . were central to the organization" (Rubin and Mesli, *Ashgate* 295).

Along with the creation of formal leather organizations that served political, social, and educational functions,¹³ the number of bars and bathhouses that catered to the leather crowd dramatically increased nationwide during the 1970s. While major cities like New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles had a publicly visible leather social scene, many cities could not support a leather-focused bar, which accounts for, in the early 1970s, the “great voids in the areas covered” by Townsend’s “Appendix. A” in the *Handbook*. Although his Appendix lists many bars across North America and Europe, “there simply are no leatherbars in Albuquerque, Biloxi, Memphis, Dallas, etc.” (104) and “many large cities (Chicago being a good example) have far fewer outlets than their size would lead you to expect. . . . The other bars in other cities I have listed are mostly qualified by the comment: ‘If there’s leather around, this is where you’ll find it.’ Sometimes it’s a big ‘if’” (*Handbook* 104).¹⁴

In much the same way that Foucault identifies a shift in techniques of the self in which increased bureaucratization leads to a new emphasis on the importance and amount of writing in public life and in the creation of the self, the 1970s’ institutionalization of leather in gay social life and the development of SM social organizations and communities across the nation, coincides with the increased importance of writing in leather culture. In many ways, Townsend’s *Handbook*, which inspired “instant

¹³ This second-wave of leather organizations, which tended to emphasize education and politics in addition to their social and sexual functions, differ from the earliest groups associated with SM, like gay motorcycle clubs. These groups, like the Los Angeles Satyrs (founded in 1954, they claim to be the oldest continually running gay organization in the world), were primarily social and sexual organizations though they were not exclusively composed of leathersmen into SM; rather, early gay motorcycle clubs also included men who appreciated the masculine aesthetic, enjoyed riding motorcycles or motorcycle riders, fisters, and people more generally into rough sex (Rubin, “Valley of the Kings”).

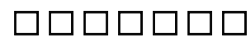
¹⁴ Having solicited information from his contacts and written the *Handbook* in only a matter of months, Townsend explains that “unless there is a greater-than-usual lag between manuscript submission and printing it should be reasonably accurate as you read it” (*Handbook* 104).

commercial imitation [and] signaled the enthusiastic beginning of a pop culture genre: *how-to* and *self-improvement* books for leather players” (Fritscher 201), set the tone for the types of SM texts that would follow; in doing so, the *Handbook* fundamentally changed how sexual, technical, and social knowledge were transmitted amongst leatherfolk. More specifically, we can see how narrative and its role in erotic education and community formation becomes inextricably tied to the underlying tenets of a positive-productive theory of SM.

The paradigm shift from an oral to literary leather culture that is both reflected and partially effected by the 1972 publication of the *Handbook*, was further cemented by the boom in publication of mixed-genre SM texts produced by and for gay, lesbian, and queer leatherfolk in the *Handbook*’s wake, which—as noted earlier—resulted from publishing freedoms that were largely won in trials over explicit (often sadomasochistic) content in postmodern literature, like *Naked Lunch*. No longer an exclusively oral tradition, from the 1970s onward leather became an increasingly visible and powerful force, in no small part due to the wider circulation of knowledge enabled by textual mediums. This link between SM writing and modes of socialization and knowledge transmission within leather communities, provides historical evidence of SM as a queer world-making practice that catalyzed fundamental shifts in queer relationality, which themselves coincide with the increased sexualization of American culture at large.

By juxtaposing these two histories, this project’s queer pairing of canonical postmodern representations and non-canonical queer texts not only unveils the relationship between these two embodied practices, but drastically reconsiders both the

role of SM (or explicit sexuality more generally) in postmodern criticism and SM's significance in queer theory. In doing so, this project affects understandings not only of American post-WWII fiction, but also of queer literary history, and the history of queer politics and movements of the past 50 years; or in the words of Jose Esteban Muñoz: "narratives of the past, enable utopian imaginings of another time and place that is not yet here but nonetheless functions as a doing for futurity, a conjuring of both future and past to critique presentness" (*Cruising Utopia* 106).



To begin with, demonstrating the interrelatedness of these two phenomena requires an insistence on SM's pleasures and material effects in literature. This approach radically revises previous postmodern scholarship that often sanitizes SM of its eroticism by reading it solely as satire or metaphor. For instance, in a 1984 article for *Revue française d'études américaines*, Larry McCaffrey discusses changes in erotic representation in modernist and postmodernist fiction. For McCaffrey, the relaxation of obscenity laws increased literary realism, since authors no longer had to halt "a key scene at the bedroom door" ("And Still" 277); McCaffrey also observes how "the same swirl of radicalizing forces which was freeing fiction from restrictions as to content was also having its effects on the formal features . . . producing various non-traditional fictional approaches" that characterize postmodern writing ("And Still" 278). McCaffrey argues that "postmodern writers—now free to present sex as openly as they wish—often [find] it useful to use sexual materials as a metaphor for something else" ("And Still" 278), a claim he demonstrates through close readings of William Gass's *Willie Master's*

Lonesome Wife, Robert Coover's *Spanking the Maid*, Alexander Theroux's *Darconville's Cat*, and Ted Mooney's *Easy Travel to Other Planets*.

McCaffrey's observations about the narrative innovations and new explicitness of sex in postmodern fiction are accurate. And yet, by reading sex primarily as a metaphor and distancing postmodern pornographic material from prurient appeal, McCaffrey neglects key aspects of the *Roth* case that made such representations possible. Specifically, he neglects how *Roth* allows for prurient appeal within a work that—as a whole—has redeeming social value. Moreover, the redeeming value of pornography extends beyond the artistic merit of the work containing it; indeed, even the findings of the National Commission on Obscenity and Pornography (1970)¹⁵ “hailed [pornography] as an educational tool for learning about human sexuality that could help adults release inhibitions” (Bronstein 70). Thus, by acknowledging both the primacy of erotic gratification in pornographic literature and postmodernism's aggressive blending of high and low cultural forms—including pornography—we can problematize the claim that sexual explicitness in postmodern fiction functions primarily on a metaphoric level, when in fact its erotic appeal may be of equal importance.

In instances when critics do not “redeem” SM from its eroticism by reading it as a parody, they have tended to condemn such representations as prurient, hetero-masculinist sexual fantasies. This type of insidious anti-SM bias might be read as a hold-over from the discourses produced by academics during the sex wars. For some critics,

¹⁵ Chaired by William B. Lockhart, Dean of the University of Minnesota Law School, the Lockhart Commission, as it was informally referred to, was convened by President Johnson in 1968. However, by the time the Lockhart Commission submitted its findings—recommending “the repeal of all obscenity laws applicable to consenting adults” (De Grazia 435n2)—President Nixon had taken office and “even before the report was officially released, President Nixon denounced it as ‘morally bankrupt’” (De Grazia 552).

pornographic representations in postmodern fiction are paradoxically too “real”—for what they indicate about sex and gender politics—while also functioning metaphorically to the point where “pornography” ceases to function pruriently. This paradoxical critical tendency can be found in Michael Bérubé’s condemnation of Pynchon’s representation of pornographic film in *Gravity’s Rainbow*; Bérubé finds “the submission of and violence against women; the familiar assertion, in so many words, that she loves it; and the mass/massive arousal of the male spectators, by which the film is rendered so clear and present a danger to women as to confirm” Robin Morgan’s assertion that “pornography is the theory, and rape the practice” (241). Despite critiquing Pynchon’s pornographic objectification of women, Bérubé also de-sexualizes the term pornography, as when he uses Lacanian theories of desire to read pornography as “the condition of all language: papering over and denying the lack, automatically replaying chains of desire, or reconstituting *différance* into a metaphysics of presence” (264). This conflicted critical tendency to decry the sexuality represented in postmodern fiction, while still formulating one’s argument around an abstracted version of “the pornographic” allows critics to sidestep the task my dissertation takes on: exploring the erotics and politics of such representations for their relationship to actual sexual practices and communities.

Though the great majority of postmodern criticism de-sexualizes SM, postmodern scholarship is by no means universally critical of SM itself. For example, Ihab Hassan rejects strict literary periodization in favor of a schematic differentiation between modernist and postmodernist literature. In doing so, Hassan identifies the Marquis de Sade as an important antecedent of postmodern literature, placing him, along with

postmodernists like Burroughs or Pynchon, within a tradition of a “literature of silence.” Hassan explains how Sade “in bequeathing porno-aesthetics to literature . . . made it possible for Mailer, say, or for Burroughs to develop parodies of sexual violence” (7-8). Hassan’s “literature of silence” is typified by indeterminacy, which in turn is characterized by “ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation” (92). In terms of explicitly schematic differences between modernism and postmodernism, Hassan lists the following oppositions, with the left side of the slash indicating modernist tendencies and the right indicating postmodernist tendencies: purpose/play; art object/process; performance/happening; genre/intertext; genital and phallic/polymorphous and androgynous, to name a few (91). While Hassan clearly identifies non-genitally oriented sexual pleasures as characteristic of postmodern literature, in addition to citing the relation between Sade and postmodernism, he does little to develop this concept in terms of embodied SM practices which, as Foucault and many others have subsequently argued, are distinguished by polymorphous (i.e. non-genital) pleasures.

Although Hassan’s detailed schematic provides one way of conceptualizing SM’s relation to postmodern aesthetics, Brian McHale’s work on postmodernism is more productive for my project given McHale’s emphasis on narrative theory. Of particular importance is McHale’s identification of the sadomasochistic relation between text and reader, tendencies he sees in the fiction of Pynchon, Sukenick, Barth, and Federman, to name a few. McHale’s claim that representations of SM content in postmodern fiction are mirrored by the sadomasochistic relation between text and reader is rooted primarily in

postmodern authors' aggressive use of second-person direct address, often in conjunction with self-erasure. By way of illustration McHale explains that postmodernist self-erasure often occurs when sensationalist material is used "to lure the reader into making an emotional investment in the sequence under erasure, typically by arousing his or her anxieties, fascination with the taboo, or prurient interests" (*Postmodernist* 102).

Postmodernist authors like Pynchon and Sukenick often employ this literary device in "pornographic or quasi-pornographic materials" (McHale, *Postmodernist* 102). One could certainly apply this observation to the narration and re-narration of various sexual combinations in Coover's "The Babysitter" as well; however, my study more broadly explores how the sadomasochistic relation represented in postmodern fiction is related to a text's structure in moments that do not directly address the reader and in scenes that are not retrospectively placed under erasure. Given the very narrative (though not necessarily linear) structure of SM practice, McHale's narrative theory is quite useful for building my extended analysis of the details of sadomasochistic representations in postmodern fiction and relating them to community-produced SM narratives.

My turn to non-canonical queer texts as significant sources of theory problematizes contemporary SM queer scholarship. Despite its seeming malleability, theorizations of SM by academics have remained surprisingly stable, emphasizing its negative qualities, mainly its subversive potential as an oppositional and critical politics. In part, these critical tendencies arise from the elision of practitioner-produced SM theory. Even when scholars reference such work they fail to mention its emphasis on community building, knowledge production, and (the erotics) of sexual education. By

identifying SM as a positive and productive force with significant educational and relational potential, this project counters psychoanalytic theorizations of SM that align it with the antirelational turn.

The genesis of queer theory's antirelational moment appears in Leo Bersani's "Is The Rectum a Grave?" (1988), which concludes with his influential claim that "sexuality is socially dysfunctional in that it brings people together only to plunge them into a self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance* that drives them apart" ("Rectum" 222). The antirelational thesis is further developed in *Homos* (1995), where Bersani more directly engages with SM's queerness, in particular masochistic *jouissance*. While this work has had a far-reaching impact on subsequent queer theorizations of SM, Bersani remains relatively unique both for his engagement with practitioner-produced SM texts and his overt condemnation of the politics of embodied (gay) SM practice. Indeed, Bersani takes issue with the idea—espoused by some SM practitioners¹⁶—that SM has therapeutic value, snidely quipping that "s/m offers the benefits of therapy at no financial cost, and with an erotic thrill to boot. . . . Free association is an expensive bore; with the whip, *jouir* becomes identical to *durcharbeiten*" (*Homos* 84).¹⁷ Bersani contends that while SM might "expos[e] the mechanisms of power in society" (*Homos* 83), he persists in arguing that "to empower the disenfranchised partner is, however, not the same thing as eliminating struggles for power in erotic negotiations" (*Homos* 82). Bersani clarifies this by pointing out how the mere enjoyment of power's "prerogatives even if you're not one

¹⁶ Bersani cites Geoff Mains, Richard Hopcke, and Mark Thompson as examples of gay leathermen who have, at one time or another, touted the therapeutic value of SM.

¹⁷ In other words, through SM, orgasm (*jouir*) can replace Freud's process of "working-through" (*durcharbeiten*) a patient's symptoms.

of the privileged” (*Homos* 86) reinforces social privilege and does not—as SM practitioners claim—contest it. Though Bersani acknowledges that SM does not reproduce “the intentionality supporting the structures in society,” he maintains that “the polarized structure of master and slave, of dominance and submission, is the same in Nazism and in S/M” (*Homos* 88). The replication and aestheticization of structures of power ultimately leads Bersani to conclude that SM “fortifies those structures by suggesting that they have an appeal independent of the political ideologies that exploit the appeal, thus further suggesting the intractability of extreme forms of oppression” (*Homos* 90).

Despite Bersani’s evident distaste for gay SM culture and practices, his psychoanalytic approach ultimately finds queer value in SM—even if that value manifests primarily in terms of individual, psychic effects and SM’s abstraction to the level of metaphor. For Bersani, the masochist’s transformation of pain into pleasure—a “potentially dysfunctional rejection of pain”—reveals how “self-shattering . . . may be the secret reason for S/M’s universalizing of pleasure” (*Homos* 94). Of particular importance is the idea that masochistic *jouissance* “disrupts the ego’s coherence and dissolves its boundaries” (*Homos* 101) and in doing so self-shattering “makes the subject unfindable as an object of discipline” (*Homos* 99). And it is this claim—that the psychic effects of masochism constitute a negative politics through which subjects might escape institutional power—that has animated a great deal of subsequent theoretical work, particularly in scholars’ emphasis on SM’s disruptive qualities.

For example, Lynda Hart's *Performing Sadomasochism: Between the Body and the Flesh* (1998) also draws from psychoanalysis, although it additionally reframes the controversy over SM amongst lesbian feminists through performativity. By asking what "kind of performance lesbian s/m might be," Hart problematizes a central question within the feminist sex wars: are SM acts merely role-playing or are they more "real" than many pro-SM lesbian arguments might allow for (Hart 149)? Hart's work is also unique in recent scholarship for its analysis of practitioner-produced SM erotica, like Califia's "The Calyx of Isis." While gesturing toward SM's potential to produce new modes of relationality, Hart ultimately privileges SM's disruptive effects, namely, how SM performances blur the boundaries between life and death and between illusion and authenticity (163-5).

Recent queer theorizations of SM have more overtly distanced themselves from Bersani, while ironically perpetuating the ego-shattering potential of SM that originates with his work. For example, Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010) positions itself against Bersani's "white gay male argument" about "s/m's largely structural role as a force of negation" (143), while Halberstam situates *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) as a response and remedy to "the excessively small archive that represents queer negativity. The gay male archive coincides with the canonical archive and narrows it down to a select group of antisocial queer aesthetes and camp icons and texts" (Halberstam, "The Politics of Negativity" 824). Where Freeman reads SM as an erotohistoriographic practice that enables us to rethink one's relation with past trauma and violence (both personal and historical), Halberstam takes up Bersani's

“self-shattering” and reads masochism as a form of radical passivity that resists proscriptive forms of agency (*Queer Art* 136); in both, SM critiques the hegemonic order. Freeman’s and Halberstam’s texts are further linked by their primary objects of study from which they theorize SM—cultural artifacts that are noticeably distant from the SM practices found in queer sexual communities. Specifically, Freeman discusses the erotic art film, *The Attendant*, which depicts a black museum guard’s sexual encounter with a white, male museum visitor in a scene that reanimates “a painting displayed at the museum, F.A. Biard’s abolitionist painting of 1840, variously titled *The Slave Trade, Scene on the Coast of Africa, or Slaved on the West Coast of Africa*” (145). For Freeman, this representation of SM not only intervenes in historical hierarchies of power—European/African, Master/Slave, White/Black, Colonizer/Colonized—it enables contemporary individuals to come to terms with, experience, and reimagine the long shadow of racism and oppression cast by the English transatlantic slave trade. Likewise, Halberstam theorizes masochism’s “shadow feminist” potential by analyzing Yoko Ono’s performance art, Elfriede Jelinek’s novel *The Piano Teacher*, and visual art, like J.A. Nicholls’s collage work, amongst others. Significantly, both queer theorizations of SM generally elide practitioner-produced knowledge, although Halberstam identifies Rubin’s work as a unique example of scholarship that uses masochism to consider the relation between self and other (*Queer Art* 135), while Freeman cites Califia in a footnote appended to a basic definition of SM.

Bersani’s influence is most apparent in Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), which elaborates a theory of queer negativity. Edelman’s

polemic extends Bersani's work by transforming the antirelational thesis into the antisocial—characterized by a refusal to embrace “some positive social value; its value, instead, resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself” (*No Future* 6). Queerness's disruptive potential primarily draws from its structural opposition to a society that, in Edelman's view, is organized around the reproduction of hegemonic (i.e. heteronormative) power structures. Although Edelman takes the abstraction of queerness to an extreme, distancing it so far from embodied sexual practices as to propose that “no platform or position from which queer sexuality or any queer subject might finally and truly become itself” (*No Future* 17-18), his queer negativity contains within it erotic valences. This is particularly apparent in Edelman's deployment of *jouissance* as that which transcends the boundaries of pleasure and pain, much like SM.

Disentangling this project from previous antirelational understandings of SM draws inspiration from a variety of contemporary scholars who—unlike the theorists discussed above—center practitioner-produced material, even while their archives differ from my own; this work includes Juana María Rodríguez's discussions of fantasy in *GLQ* (2011) and *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (2014); Ummni Khan's identification of shared tropes across a range of pro- and anti-SM discourses found in the sex wars, popular media, and the law in *Vicarious Kinks: S/M in the Socio-Legal Imaginary* (2014); and Ariane Cruz's study of racialized desire, pornography, and violence in *The Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM, and Pornography* (2016). Cruz's

work is especially relevant for my discussion of interracial SM, particularly given her insistence on the possibility of finding pleasure in unlikely places.

In a broader sense, the work of theorizing the hopeful potential that inheres in SM is anchored by Muñoz's influential discussions of queer futurity and utopia. Muñoz responds to Edelman's polemical extension of the antirelational thesis—"the assertion that there is no future for the queer"—"by arguing that queerness is primarily about futurity. Queerness is always on the horizon" (Muñoz, "Thinking Beyond" 825).

Although *Cruising Utopia* does not specifically analyze SM practices, Muñoz's focus on archival materials, queer ephemera, and residual gesture is a particularly useful model for my study of sexual acts and community practices that are temporally distant from the contemporary moment. Like Muñoz's book, my own project illuminates the queer potential found in "concrete [as opposed to abstract] utopias" which are the (occasionally "daydreamlike") "hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many. Concrete utopias are the realm of educated hope" (Muñoz, *Cruising* 3). It is this collective hope for a queerer world with more sexual possibilities that I find again and again across my objects of study, even in unlikely places like postmodern fiction. Muñoz's exploration of past modes of queer community that contain alternate modes of relationality, community, and intersubjective relations (whether sexual or not), has guided my exploration of sexual and textual SM practices in that I too am reading for the ways in which SM pleasures necessitate the production of queer communities and knowledges.

□□□□□□□

Beginning with an overview of sadomasochism in canonical texts that span the temporal, political, and aesthetic range of high postmodernism—Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* (1959, 1962), Coover’s short story “The Babysitter” from *Pricksongs & Descants* (1969), and Acker’s *Don Quixote* (1986)—I establish some of the ways that SM has been represented in “high” literature of the postmodern period and how it has been taken up in criticism. Chapter One radically revises the tendency in literary scholarship to de-eroticize sadomasochistic representations and read them as satire or allegory. By focusing on the details of specific sexual acts and pleasures, SM becomes visible as a defining component of postmodern politics and narrative innovation. This revisionary analysis of postmodern fiction is informed by theories found in the concurrent discourses, practices, and communities of queer SM subcultures, which I deploy in order to demonstrate that SM is a significant, yet overlooked, critical optic for reading postmodern fiction, one that brings to light the interrelatedness of postmodernism and queer pleasures.

The second chapter develops a theorization of SM in which SM becomes a positive and productive force for queerness, countering the prevailing critical association of SM with queer negativity. Through close-readings of practitioner-produced erotica—John Preston’s *Mr. Benson* (1981), Patrick Califia’s “The Calyx of Isis” (1988), and Carol Queen’s *The Leather Daddy and the Femme* (1998)—that span various chronological, geographic, and gendered SM communities, I establish the specific ways that SM produces knowledge, community, narrative innovation, and new modes of relationality and interpersonal dynamics. Like the previous chapter’s range of texts, each of these was chosen as a representative example of a different historical moment within

gay male, lesbian, and queer SM subcultures, respectively. This chapter's investigation of what SM produces and necessitates in terms of queer relationality pays particular attention to erotic education, the realization of fantasy, and queer world-making practices.

Chapter Three extends the relevance of the theory developed in Chapter Two beyond the textual, articulating how a positive-productive understanding of SM is equally applicable to embodied experience and queer social-sexual practices. By combining extensive archival research on SM organizations, authors, and activists, with analysis of Townsend's *The Leatherman's Handbook* (1972) and Samois's texts, *What Color is Your Handkerchief: A Lesbian S/M Sexuality Reader* (1979) and *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M* (1981), I link theoretical knowledge with experiential knowledge and embodied practice. My interdisciplinary approach to these SM guidebooks and essay collections—which blend personal essay, how-to instruction, and sexual theory with pornography—demonstrates not only how SM is an inherently narrative practice, but also how SM is itself produced by and productive of narrative.

The final chapter returns to canonical fiction with close readings of SM representations in a paradigmatic postmodern novel, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), selected both for the text's centrality to theories of literary postmodernism and the controversial status of its infamously explicit and queer SM representations. By reading for the ways in which a positive-productive theorization of SM revises the assumptions made about the hetero-masculinity of Pynchon's oeuvre, I demonstrate the relation between Pynchon's representations and embodied queer SM experience. At the same time, this chapter articulates the relevance of a positive-

productive understanding of SM as a critical optic for canonical texts as well, particularly for the ways in which it extends our understanding of SM's relation to narrative and how postmodernist poetics are themselves intertwined with SM narrative practices.

The conclusion returns to the queer futurity/negativity debates that underscore the literature review presented here. By considering how the diverse, and at times contradictory, representations of SM in Pynchon require two widely divergent approaches to SM—the positive-productive theorization developed in this project and the queer psychoanalytic understandings that link SM with the antirelational turn—the conclusion posits SM as a critical optic through which we might reconcile the negativity/futurity binary in recent queer theory debates.

My project's organization and its investment in the past builds on Muñoz's understanding of "queerness as a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity" (*Cruising* 16). It is this turn towards history—both sexual and textual—as a source of knowledge about queer relationality, community, and embodied practice that my own project pursues through its examination of SM literature produced by and for this subculture. This study sheds light not only on SM's importance but also on its significant historical role as a queer world-making practice. In doing so, *SM in Postmodern America* offers SM as an underused way of considering the role of sexuality in canonical, postmodern literature and in American culture more broadly.

Chapter 1. Reassessing Postmodern Literature: Why Can't it Just Be Sex?

Postmodernist fiction contains an unprecedented level of diverse and explicit sexual representation. This is likely a result of postmodernist authors' repurposing of low genres, such as pornography, and a relaxation in obscenity law—which was the focus of my Introduction. Indeed, the rise of postmodern literature coincides with a period in American history when “the Warren Court progressively contracted the domain of obscenity, in large part affirming the appropriateness of sex as a matter for public consumption” (D’Emilio & Freedman 287). Instances of sex and violence abound in postmodern literature, as in Clarence Major’s *Reflex and Bone Structure* (1976) or in the more explicit references to SM in Ronald Sukenick’s *The Death of the Novel* (1969). This chapter is focused on William Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (1959, 1962), Robert Coover’s short story “The Babysitter” (*Pricksongs & Descants* 1969), and Kathy Acker’s *Don Quixote* (1986)—three paradigmatic examples of postmodern fiction that embrace the playful postmodern tendency to collapse the high/low cultural binary, largely seen in each author’s incorporation of pornographic material. As noted in the Introduction, each text was published at an historical moment that corresponds with distinct shifts in American attitudes toward sexuality; furthermore, their respective publication dates

roughly encompass the span of high postmodernist fiction. These texts were also chosen for their significant (and influential) contributions to postmodern narrative experimentation—Burroughs with his cut-up method, Coover with his aggressively antimimetic structure, and Acker with her unique feminist re-telling of literary classics—each of which mark distinct manifestations of postmodernism. Certainly, myriad postmodern authors incorporate explicit, sadomasochistic representations into their fiction and any number of them could have been chosen for this analysis. However, the aesthetic, thematic, and political range found across Burroughs’s, Coover’s, and Acker’s texts suggests the significance of SM across different iterations of the postmodern movement. By surveying the diverse ways SM has been taken up in the postmodern canon, this chapter lays the groundwork for a broader recuperation of explicit representations in postmodernist fiction.

In *Taking it Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism and Contemporary American Culture* (1998), David Savran distinguishes between representations of SM and representations of sex and violence, characterizing the explicit sex in William Burroughs’s fiction as a “sadomasochistic performance” that “represents not a traditional, scripted S/M scene between two consenting parties but sexual violence. There is no contract here, no safe word” (131)—a generalization that is mostly true, though it neglects the moments when Burroughs makes overtly clear both the consent in and the performative nature of some of his representations of sexualized violence. This chapter, and the dissertation more generally, takes as a starting point this differentiation between SM and sexual violence. At first glance, sexual violence, as opposed to SM proper, appears far more characteristic of postmodern fiction’s representations of sex. However,

returning to postmodernist fiction with a queer methodology brings into focus the significance of embodied sexual practices to postmodern narrative, shedding new light on both the content and structure that characterizes this literature. It might seem counterintuitive to center a project around the interrelatedness between queer pornography and explicit representations of sex in postmodern fiction, the latter of which have often been condemned for their apparent aggressive (and misogynistic) heteromascularity. Thus, it is essential to emphasize that my use of the term “queer” refers to non-normative and stigmatized modes of sexual practice. My analysis of sex in postmodern fiction will not be limited to representations of same-sex sex; while inclusive of such scenes, I will read postmodern fiction for instances of sexual practice that exceed heteronormative values, practices, like SM, that have often been labeled “perverse.”

Historically, sadomasochistic representations in postmodern fiction are far more likely to be interpreted by critics as excessive intensifications of heteronormativity or patriarchal culture, rather than as embodied practices that might be linked to queer sexual subcultures. It is easy to see why such critiques are common, given how postmodern representations of sex often highlight gendered power differentials through graphic scenes of violent sex in which consent is not easily discerned. If and when critics link such explicit representations in postmodern fiction with embodied practices, this material is most often read as reflective of patriarchal, sexist attitudes and/or linked to an author’s personal history of sexual trauma and abuse.¹⁸ Given this longstanding critical tendency to read the interweaving of violence with sex in postmodern novels as a regressive, male

¹⁸ Even Burroughs himself “traced his sexual anxiety to a repressed memory: when he was four years old, his nanny forced him to perform oral sex on her boyfriend” (Schjeldahl, “The Outlaw” n.p.). Hume also mentions the incident with Burroughs’s nanny as a relevant factor in Burroughs’s antifemale imagery.

pornographic fantasy whose only politics would be a negative one (from the feminist perspective), I propose a queering of this postmodern characteristic. By juxtaposing this analysis of explicit representations of sex in postmodern fiction in Chapter One with my later chapters on queer SM pornographies published in the same period, I am building towards a radical reevaluation of how we might critically engage with post-World War II fiction, demonstrating in my final chapter that queer SM can be used as a lens to reevaluate the politics and aesthetic function of sadomasochistic sex in postmodern fiction.

NAKED LUNCH

Published just on the cusp of a tidal shift in U.S. obscenity laws, *Naked Lunch* is both the only text analyzed in this chapter to have faced legal censorship in the U.S. and the only text that was initially marketed as pornography—or in the parlance of its time, a “dirty book.”¹⁹ With the exception of the coprophagic SM scene in Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Burroughs’s representations of sex in two strikingly similar sections (or “routines,” as Burroughs described them) of *Naked Lunch*—“Hassan’s Rumpus Room” and “A.J.’s Annual Party”—are perhaps the most notoriously grotesque representations of sexual practice in the postmodern canon. Given Burroughs’s investment in critiquing hierarchical systems of power and control—from State power, through the relationship between a junky and his drugs, to the privileged gender binary—it is not surprising that Burroughs’s exploration of power and control can also be found in

¹⁹ However, Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School* did face censorship in Germany (see “Devoured by Myths (Interview)”).

his pornographic representations of sex, which frequently include anal intercourse, non-human participants, and (auto-)erotic asphyxiation. In both “Rumpus Room” and “Annual Party” Burroughs describes the anal rape of countless young boys while they are hung to death, at which point the boys frequently experience death spasms resulting simultaneously in an emptying of their bowels and, at times, ejaculation; indeed, one would be hard pressed to find a more overt eroticization of the queerly abject (shit, death, homosexuality—each the very antithesis of reproductive intercourse)²⁰ in all of literature.²¹ Yet scholarship remains generally silent on these extraordinary routines.²²

In Burroughs scholarship, the limited discussions of sexuality have tended to focus on the linking of homosexuality with disease²³ or Burroughs’s emphatic opposition to effeminate stereotypes of homosexuality.²⁴ This latter tendency of Burroughs gives rise to the privileging of queer masculinity in his texts.²⁵ One might argue that the “antifemale imagery” that Kathryn Hume identifies throughout Burroughs’s texts (131), is echoed by the masculinist discourse found in gay, male SM pornography that constructs SM as a significant site of male bonding. David Savran certainly makes just this connection when

²⁰ For a foundational theorization of queer abjection and its politics see Leo Bersani’s *Homos* (1996), especially his analysis of Jean Genet’s fiction.

²¹ Perhaps the sole rival being Samuel R. Delany’s *Hogg* (1995)—see Kathryn Hume’s *Aggressive Fictions: Reading the Contemporary American Novel* for an extended analysis of this text—or Delany’s *The Mad Man* (1994). For an extended analysis of the relation between queer abjection and race in Delany’s work and others, see Dariack Scott’s *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (2010).

²² In fact, some critics have even gone so far as to refrain from quoting the material when it would be expedient to do so: David Lodge rejects Burroughs’s claim that the “Orgasm Death Gimmick” (seen in “Rumpus” and “Annual”) is a criticism of capital punishment and counters that *Naked Lunch* “suspends rather than activates the reader’s moral sense, and incites him to an imaginative collaboration in the orgy. Since *I do not propose to quote from this scene here, I shall illustrate my point with a rather less offensive passage*” (italics mine, Lodge “Objections to William Burroughs” 207).

²³ See Fiona Paton’s “Monstrous Rhetoric: *Naked Lunch*, National Insecurity, and the Gothic Fifties” in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 52.1 (Spring 2010): 48-69.

²⁴ See Russel, Savran, and Hume.

²⁵ As Robin Lydenberg has observed “women play little if any role in Burroughs’ utopian fictions” (qtd. in Savran 91-92).

he critiques leathermen's unreflective embrace of the "misogynist and primitivist rhetoric of the men's movement" (Savran 234), which appears in the work of Steward, Preston, and Thompson when they construct leathersex as "a way for men to reclaim a pure—because wholly homosocial—masculinity," "an 'authentic,' privatized self, always in the past, always elsewhere" that is understood as a "reaction against the feminization not only of the gay man but also of the normative straight male subject in post-World War II culture" (Savran 234).

Leathermen's tendency to privilege masculinity calls to mind Savran's analysis of Burroughs, in which he explains that Burroughs's scorn for the feminization of homosexuals indicates that "his homophobia should really be seen as a species of misogyny" (Savran 89).²⁶ Savran links this masculinist rhetoric to what he sees as the single constant in Burroughs's politics—"his scorn for all control systems, bureaucracies, and institutions that threaten individual 'freedom'"—which gives rise in Burroughs to a politics that "is founded on an attempt to secure the masculine sovereignty of the political subject" (98).

But can all of Burroughs's writing, including his explicitly pornographic representations, be so easily folded into such a project? What precisely does the pornographic movie shown at A.J.'s annual party or the homosexual sadism of the Mugwumps have to do with threats to individual freedom and a utopian desire for the

²⁶ It should, however, be noted that unlike in Burroughs, the masculinist emphasis found in gay, male SM pornography was partly a reflection of the homosocial subcultures it fictionalized and partly dictated by publishing trends. John Preston explains that women "are forbidden in most gay male periodicals.... It's too bad. There are some wonderful variations that could be attempted with a bi-gender cast" (*My Life* 258). These cross-gender pornography variations are, however, explored in queer, lesbian SM erotica—like in Califia's "The Surprise Party" and in Carol Queen's *The Leather Daddy and the Femme*, to name just two examples.

masculine sovereignty of the political subject? Savran's overarching claims about the politics of Burroughs's oeuvre would seem to be supported by Burroughs's own 1960 preface to *Naked Lunch* in which he claims that the pornographic passages from *Naked Lunch* "were written as a tract against Capital Punishment in the manner of Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal* . . . [and were] intended to reveal capital punishment as the obscene, barbaric and disgusting anachronism that it is. As always the lunch is naked" (NL 205). So if we accept Burroughs's statement of authorial intent and see capital punishment as the ultimate expression of State power, making it the greatest threat to individual freedom, then Burroughs's pornographic routines can easily be incorporated into Savran's interpretation.

However, David Lodge cautions against spurious vindications of "Rumpus Room" and "Annual Party" as critiques of capital punishment, articulately explaining that "when we come to the Orgasm Death Gimmick, no norms have been established by which its nauseating grotesquerie can be measured and interpreted in the way intended by Burroughs. Deprived of our bearings in empirical reality...we are in no position to apply the episode (as we apply Swift's *Modest Proposal*) to the real world and draw an instructive moral" (Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing* 47). According to Lodge, Burroughs's vindicating claim fails entirely and these routines do not successfully function as a critical parody, nor perhaps were they ever meant to. Indeed, Burroughs's description of his satirical project in "Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness," which Rossett used as the introduction to the 1962 Grove Press edition was, as "Polina MacKay argues . . . 'designed to ease the censor' (155)" (Wilson 110). Furthermore, Lodge argues that *Naked Lunch* fails as pornography as well: "*The Naked Lunch* is not

pornographic. . . . The context is never stable enough for long enough to allow a steady build-up of erotic excitement” (*The Modes of Modern Writing* 45). In these routines, “all kinds of sexual behaviour and perversion are mixed up together in this sequence, in defiance of the strict decorum of pornography” (*The Modes of Modern Writing* 46), which supposedly limits the repertoire of activities in any single text based on the pornographer’s own tastes or the dictates of the readers—“heterosexual *or* homosexual *or* sadomasochistic *or* rubber fetishistic, etc.” (45). Lodge’s exclusion of “Hassan’s Rumpus Room” and “A.J.’s Annual Party” from the category of pornography relies on a limited definition of pornography that fails to account for the unique generic tendencies of the queer pornographies that I will explore later; indeed, those queer pornographies build their eroticism precisely through the overlapping and disruption of such restrictive categories.

In discussing the two pornographic routines, Ron Loewinsohn writes that “even a very generous and attentive reader will find it hard to distinguish between the pornography of the one and the pornography of the other, since the ‘good’ Factualists at A.J.’s party appear to be engaged in exactly the same perversions as the ‘evil’ Liquefactionists in Hassan’s rumpus room” (579). However, if we read “Rumpus Room” and “Annual Party” as a species of queer pornography, focusing, as do my other readings of pornographic texts, on the specifics of the embodied acts, then we find an interesting interplay between sexual pleasure, violence, and representation that has gone unacknowledged, one that distinguishes the sexual violence of “Rumpus Room” from the queer, consensual pleasures that appear in the film shown during “Annual Party.” Loewinsohn acknowledges that “the tortures and murders performed in Hassan’s rumpus

room are as real as any actions can be in a work of fiction, while at A.J.'s party the same acts are *represented*.... A.J.'s movie necessarily has to show the evils that abound in Interzone as 'realistically' as it can.... A.J.'s party is a miniversion of the entire project of *Naked Lunch* itself" (580). In essence, Loewinsohn emphasizes the ontologically "real" status of the violent acts perpetrated in "Rumpus Room" and the representational or fictional nature of the sexual violence that is framed as a film in "Annual Party." Yet this reading overlooks the "realness" of the film actors' embodied experiences in "Annual Party."

Specifically, Loewinsohn's differentiation between the two routines elides the text's own emphasis on the ontologically "real" status of the embodied pleasures seen in the film from "Annual Party." Despite citing the live presence of the actors at A.J.'s as proof of the fictionality of the tortures and executions represented in the film, Loewinsohn refrains from discussing the aspects of the film that are ontologically true on the novel's diegetic level: its embodied pleasures. "Annual Party" opens with a brief appearance by the film's director, "The Great Slashtubitch," who, the narrator explains, is prone to mistreating and firing actors who displease him:

'Get out of my studio, you cheap four-flushing ham! Did you think to pass a counterfeit orgasm on me! THE GREAT SLASHTUBITCH! I could tell if you come by regard the beeg toe. Idiot! Mindless scum!! Insolent baggage!!! Go peddle thy ass and know that it takes sincerity and art, and devotion, to work for Slashtubitch. Not shoddy trickery, dubbed gasps, rubber turds and vials of milk concealed in the ear and shots of yohimbine [an aphrodisiac] sneaked in the wings.' (Burroughs 75)

Though the narrator's representation of Slashtubitch's speech patterns is comical to the point of absurdity, the reader is given no indication that the content of Slashtubitch's speech is unreliable. Trusting in the accuracy of this representation of Slashtubitch, the reader is forced to also acknowledge the "real" status of the orgasms that occur within the film embedded in "A.J.'s Annual Party"—problematizing the distinction Loewinsohn makes between the relative ontological status of the sexual acts in "Rumpus Room" and "Annual Party."

If we take it as fact that the orgasms in Slashtubitch's film are authentic, embodied occurrences and not "shoddy trickery" or post-production edits, then the film shown in "Annual Party" does far more than offer a representation of the horrors of Interzone. Aside from whatever special effects, post-production techniques, or salacious props were necessary for Slashtubitch's portrayal of the Liquefactionists' horrific and often fantastical violence—executions, genital mutilation, 3,000 foot suicide jump, etc.—the film also contains innumerable embodied acts that are ontologically "real" within *Naked Lunch*'s narrative world. The evidence for their "real" ontological status on the diegetic level can be found in the actors' orgasms and other bodily secretions, such as peeing and shitting, which occur amidst the portrayal of a variety of queer sex acts, including pegging, rimming, strap-on sex, and male-male sex.

Thus, it makes sense to analyze these acts in much the same way we might analyze the representations of embodied acts in any pornography: to discern their significance in terms of queerness, embodied practice, and politics. Indeed, turning to SM theory developed by SM author-activists helps illuminate a reading of Burroughs's pornography that resists the critical tendency to sanitize his representations of sex and

violence and to interpret such representations as anything but representations of actual erotic practices. In this context, the idea of “corporeal epistemology,” a term coined by Ummni Khan that “locates truth in our bodily urges” proves especially useful (Khan 114). Moreover, it is significant that Khan developed this term from her study of practitioner-produced SM discourse that emerged during the sex wars. According to Khan, Samois’s publications, like *What Color is Your Handkerchief* (1979), deploy “corporeal epistemology” in an attempt “to challenge the anti-s/m side’s blanket portrayal of physical desire as an overdetermined product of patriarchal conditioning” (94).

The film shown in “Annual Party” contains no fewer than eight specific mentions of male orgasm and ejaculation: from the opening “‘Wheeeeeeeee!’ the boy yells, every muscle tense, his whole body straining to empty through his cock” when Johnny is bathed, rimmed, and fingered to orgasm by a girl (Burroughs, *NL* 76); to the final moment when Johnny as “a boy sleeping against the mosque wall, ejaculates wet dreaming into a thousand cunts pink and smooth as sea-shells, feeling the delight of prickly pubic hairs slide up his cock” (*NL* 83); not to mention the multiple couplings of Johnny and Mark. This number of represented orgasms in the film does not include the possible representation of female orgasms, which, unlike the eight male orgasms, are invariably associated with explicit and non-consensual violence, as when “Mary guides [Johnny’s cock] up her cunt, writhing against him in a fluid belly dance, groaning and shrieking with delight” and then proceeds to gnaw off Johnny’s face and genitals (*NL* 82), or when Mary shits and pisses herself when she sees that Mark is going to hang her and “he sticks his cock up her and waltzes around the platform and off into space. . . . Her neck snaps. A great fluid wave undulates through her body” (*NL* 83). In contrast, each

mention of ejaculation made in the narration of the film is often, and surprisingly, accompanied by humane acts of tenderness that further heighten the dissonance between the lack of embodied pleasure in representations of non-consensual violence and the moments of queer sexual acts that result in male orgasm—like Mark “rubbing his face against Johnny’s, snarl gone, face innocent and boyish as his whole liquid being spurts into Johnny’s quivering body” (*NL* 79), or when Johnny “slumps against Mark’s body an angel on the nod. Mark pats Johnny’s shoulder absently . . .” (*NL* 81).

In Slashtubitch’s film, all the scenes of violence, execution, and suicide—with the exception of Johnny/Mark’s 3,000 foot masturbatory death jump—omit any mention or representation of ejaculation, which—if we are to believe Slashtubitch’s claim to have a keen eye for weeding out counterfeit orgasms—underscores the fictionality and representational nature of the eroticization of violence in the film. Furthermore, the gendered difference in Burroughs’s graphic representations of male and female embodied acts harkens back to a pornographic (and sadomasochistic) trope as old as Sade himself—the male sadistic impulse towards women that is said to arise from the invisibility and unknowability of female pleasure²⁷—a generic convention that has even found its way into contemporary pornography films with their emphasis on the “money shot.”²⁸

This difference between the acts that occur in “Rumpus Room” and those that occur in the film shown in “Annual Party” reveals an overlooked eroticization of queer sex and consensual power dynamics in Burroughs and not an endorsement (or

²⁷ Hence, the male desire to incite pain, which it is presumed, causes a definitive and visible reaction that cannot be feigned, or in the words of Clement, a monk from Sade’s *Justine*, “there is no more lively sensation than that of pain; its impressions are certain and dependable, they never deceive as may those of the pleasure women perpetually feign and almost never experience” (606).

²⁸ For an extended analysis of the unknowability of female pleasure and its relation to the money shot in pornographic film, see Linda Williams’s *Hard Core*.

eroticization) of control systems and the actual violence they perpetuate. Returning to Khan can illuminate this distinction if we recall how the concept of corporeal epistemology is also frequently linked to “postmodern insights on the subversive potential of appropriating and re-signifying hegemonic scripts” (Khan 114), particularly in lesbian SM texts that “posit that oppressive roles and acts do not have to be utterly rejected” (Khan 113). This resignification of hegemonic scripts within the context of queer sexual practice suggests the unacknowledged parallels between queer pornographies and Burroughs’s texts. Such similarities further highlight the importance of analyzing explicit representations of sex in postmodern literature *as pornography* and reading them accordingly—no matter how initially grotesque they might seem.

As Halberstam observes in *Female Masculinity*, the dearth of “explicit discussions of specific queer desires” in academia “makes apparent the urgency of descriptive queer projects regarding sex by showing how difference becomes readable only in the details and specifics of sexual practices” (114). Attention to the details of Burroughs’s pornographic representations reveals how imperative it is for critics to acknowledge the distinctions among queer sex, SM, and violence—while also acknowledging how these categories can overlap. Significantly, foregrounding the evidence of embodied pleasures in “Annual Party,” enables us to reconcile Burroughs’s seemingly paradoxical claim that “there’s not much sadism [in my work]. While I have that reputation, I don’t think I dwell very much on torture with a sexual connotation. It certainly is nothing that interests me personally; beating people, being beaten, all that just seems to me to be terribly dull and unpleasant” (from *The Job*, qtd. in Savran 331).

In comparing the film in “Annual Party” to the fantastical nature of the Orgasm Death Gimmick in “Rumpus Room”—which is perpetrated on young boys by the Mugwumps—we can see an emerging pattern in Burroughs’s two most famous pornographic representations: the pleasures of the body, as addictive and dangerous as they might be when they manifest in the biological effects of junk dependency, also constitute a stable source of “truth” or “reality” in Burroughs’s narrative world. This idea that Burroughs’s representations of embodied pleasure identify the body as a source of truth counters Savran’s claim that the underlying misogyny of Burroughs’s texts, like official discourse of the period, “cannot help but associate the flesh with femininity . . . for [it] is always subject to periodic changes” (Savran 89).²⁹ According to Savran, the body or flesh in Burroughs is a threat to a coherent notion of masculine subjectivity and to any form of stability, an idea that gets played out not only in Burroughs’s graphic representations of sexuality but in the war Burroughs relentlessly stages “between content and style, between a feminized body in the text and a masculinized voice of authority that ceaselessly attempts to subjugate and master the body (lest male subjectivity and discourse be fatally feminized)” (Savran 90).

But if we look at Burroughs’s representations of fleshly actions as something other than irrevocably feminized—particularly given Burroughs’s emphasis on male ejaculation and the lack of any detail regarding either female bodies or pleasures—then we find in Burroughs a privileging of the flesh and in particular of male bodies engaged

²⁹ Savran relates this link between flesh and femininity to the simultaneous revulsion from and desire for the fetishized “body-in-pieces (the castrated body)” found in Burroughs, which “is why bodies are relentlessly specularized and made the subject of violence. . . . [T]he body-in-pieces is always porous, always ejecting or being penetrated . . . and hence undermining the distinction between inside and outside” (Savran 89).

in queer sexual practices.³⁰ In such moments of privileging, Burroughs identifies the body as an authentic source of pleasure. Indeed, it is this first pleasure—the pleasure of ejaculation—that is identified in “Annual Party” as the ungraspable originary standard of pleasure that the old junky recalls when he shoots up—“the boy who jacked off fifty years ago shines immaculate through the ravaged flesh, filling the outhouse with the sweet nutty smell of young male lust . . .” (*NL* 81); sitting on a park bench “the old queer” strains “his dying flesh to occupy young buttocks and thighs, tight balls and spurting cocks” (*NL* 81). Here we see a man straining after the pleasures of queer sex, an aged body that is now forced to rely on the inferior pleasures of junk, despite his persisting desire for the uncorrupted pleasure of orgasm.

Furthermore, the originary, authentic, and perhaps incorruptible nature of male, queer sexual pleasure in Burroughs is reinforced by the placement of male orgasm in the film, which subtly de-links male orgasmic pleasure from female sadistic pleasure, from the pleasure of junk, and from the sadistic pleasure of the Mugwumps in “Rumpus Room”—the latter of which should not be read as SM at all, but rather as the violent actions of the Liquefactionist group. The fact that the film foregrounds male orgasm as a source of bodily truth, or corporeal epistemology, enables a distinction between such truths in pleasure and the instances of corrupted truth/pleasure that we see in its representations of female sadism. The film’s structure—its juxtaposition of the embodied

³⁰ Indeed, the few descriptions of queer female pleasures emphasize violence over pleasure and are constructed as counterfeit approximations of male pleasure, thus removing female bodies from the corporeal epistemology of orgasm within Burroughs. For example, we have Mary in “Annual Party” who straps “on a rubber penis,” “Steely Dan III . . . caressing the shaft. Milk spurts across the room” (Burroughs, *NL* 77). Mary recalls that Steely Dan I “was torn in two by a bull dyke. Most terrific vaginal grip I ever experienced. She could cave in a lead pipe” and that Steely Dan II was “chewed to bits by a famished candiru” (*NL* 77).

truth of queer pleasure with instances of female sexual violence—can be carried over to our analysis of the sexual acts presented in “Rumpus Room,” highlighting the non-consensual nature of the Mugwumps’ sexual practices. Although “Rumpus Room” includes many instances of orgasm from the boys who are hung by the Mugwumps, these orgasms either occur in death—which might be read as a physiological reaction to one’s neck snapping—or they occur under protest from the victims—“No, no!’ screams the boy” (NL 62), which recalls the representation of hanging in the film in “Annual Party” when Mark approaches Mary with a noose and she screams, “No, Mark!! No! No! No!” (NL 82).

This distinction between a playful, performative eroticization of power through queer sex acts—like those performed between Mark and Johnny in the film—and the Mugwumps’ violent exertion of power in “Rumpus Room,” furthers the idea that the dangerous power of heroin can partly be understood as a perversion of the bodily truth of ejaculation.³¹ Indeed, the Mugwump “has no liver, maintaining himself exclusively on sweets” (Burroughs 63), which echoes the slavish junky fiending exclusively for sugar between scores, a trope that shows up throughout *Naked Lunch*. Like the Mugwumps or like the junky, our vast capacity to desire pleasure makes us vulnerable to the corrupting forces of control, which underscores Burroughs’s emphasis on the power of embodied desire, his emphasis on the importance of pleasure to the human psyche.

³¹ Reading “injection” and “ejaculation” as inverse terms makes heroin a perverting force in the most literal (or etymological) sense of the word “perversion”: the act of ejaculating semen from one’s body gets turned around through the injection of liquid heroin into the body; thus, the injection of heroin into the body effectively turns one away from the truth/pleasure of ejaculation.

Representations of sexual acts are so fundamental to Burroughs's texts that we must resist the critical desire to desexualize Burroughs's pornographies. Although Savran offers an extensive discussion of the relationship between Burroughs, his texts, and masochism, Savran's analysis is fundamentally a psychoanalytic one—aimed at incorporating historical materialist concerns within his psychoanalytic framework in an effort to explore the unique construction of a wounded white masculinity during the Cold War period. Although Savran does spend time discussing some of the SM authors I will examine in later chapters—namely, Preston, Califia, and Townsend—Savran's approach to masochism and to Burroughs emphasizes the “heteropathic logic” that underscores Burroughs's exploration—primarily through gender—of power, social organization, control, and individual subjectivity (Savran 91-3), as opposed to being an in-depth analysis of the explicit scenes of sadomasochistic sexual practices represented in *Naked Lunch*. Savran's focus on masochism and wounded masculinity—which he identifies as a reaction to the limited social and political gains of feminism and minoritarian identity movements—primarily explores “the sadomasochistic structure of subjectivity” in Burroughs (99), at the expense of offering a close reading of sex and violence in Burroughs as embodied practices.

“THE BABYSITTER”

Unlike Burroughs scholarship—which attempts to account for the ways in which his pornographic representations might be justified, grasping for any reading that moves them away from embodiment—criticism about Coover's “The Babysitter” scarcely acknowledges the representations of embodied sexual acts in the story, with the majority

of scholarship referring only to the sexual acts in general outlines of the plot. In these articles, the content of Coover's story becomes incidental as it finds almost no place in scholarly discussions of "The Babysitter." There is, however, a notable exception to this trend: Robyn Warhol's feminist narratological reading of Coover's short story, in which she critiques the "The Babysitter" as a proliferation of rape fantasies. Although it is true that the majority of sexual fantasies and scenes in "The Babysitter" eroticize non-consensual sexual relations, as my own reading will affirm, my own reading will also suggest how the concentrated proliferation of violent sexual narratives in "The Babysitter" can be said to ultimately deconstruct itself.

As noted in the Introduction, the Massachusetts Supreme Court's decision regarding *Naked Lunch* heralded a new era of literary freedom that Coover no doubt benefited from with the 1969 publication of *Pricksongs & Descants*, a sexually explicit collection of short stories in which Coover disrupts "the orderly, objective depiction of scenes and events, those which imply a world with a single public point of view . . . and the consequence of his play with these techniques is the scrambling of everything, the dissolution of that simple legendary world we'd like to live in, in order that new values may be voiced" (Gass, "Look At Me" n.p.). In this *New York Times* book review, William H. Gass astutely comments on how Coover's text reflects the epistemic shifts occurring in American culture at that time. As noted in the Introduction, these cultural shifts were a product of a confluence of events in American life, such as women's access to contraception, the political movements of American youth who were rejecting middle class values and the notion of the American dream, and the rise in women's and gay and lesbian activism, all of which catalyzed significant changes in the status of sexuality in

legal, medical, and pop culture discourses. In this sense, “The Babysitter’s” narration of a festive suburban evening spiraling out of control,³² coupled with Coover’s metafictional strategies, amounts to a deconstruction of the narratives that had dominated American life in the 1950s and early 60s. While Coover employs antimimetic narrative strategies—such as the incompatibility of various narratives and the collapsing of narrative levels of the text—to effect this deconstruction, his story also explores how larger cultural forces were simultaneously deconstructing such values. And by applying a little pressure to Coover’s text, my reading carries these deconstructive tendencies to their logical extreme, demonstrating how—particularly in matters of sex and gender—the narrative seems to slip out of Coover’s control.

In contrast to the queer sadomasochistic retellings of Sade that we will find in Acker or the grotesquely fantastical pornographic hangings found in Burroughs, Robert Coover’s avant-garde short story “The Babysitter” offers far more realistic, though perhaps equally horrifying or narratively illogical, representations of sex and violence. More than the other postmodern works discussed in this chapter, “The Babysitter” initially appears to be the most invested in eroticizing gendered violence. As each scene is told and re-told in a way that renders a stable, “real” narrative logically impossible, readers quickly become aware of the undecidability of Coover’s narrative. To some degree this narrative structure is reminiscent of the ontological play at work in Burroughs’s, as when the pornographic film from “A.J.’s Annual Party” seems to replicate—with a difference—the sexual hangings that occurred in “Hassan’s Rumpus

³² As in Burroughs, the explicit sexual content is framed by the chronotope of the “wild party,” which might be read as a reduced manifestation of Bakhtin’s “carnival,” which encourages odd pairings and non-normative behavior.

Room.” However, the aggressively antimimetic character of *Naked Lunch* predisposes readers to perceive Burroughs’s scenes of sexual violence as fantastical exaggerations. According to David Lodge, the cinematic framing in “A.J.’s Annual Party” explains “the non-realistic element in the narrative, since effects and sequences (like the transformation of Mark into Johnny, or the dive through the window into space) that are impossible in actuality can readily be contrived in film” (*The Modes of Modern Writing* 46). However, Lodge is quick to point out that pornographic films rarely deploy experimental techniques, since they “are as wedded to a surface realism of treatment as pornographic literature, and for the same reasons” (*The Modes of Modern Writing* 46). Conversely, “The Babysitter” lacks any corresponding hints that overtly signal the unreality of its events. The tone and structure in “The Babysitter”—namely the realistic portrayal of its characters and setting and the punctuation of the narrative with time-stamps that correspond to television programs—encourages one to read the story mimetically and overlook the incompatible plot lines in an attempt to reconstruct a single through-story.

To some degree Coover fulfills the reader’s desire for mimeticism through the six scenes that begin with the time of day, all of which focus on the babysitter and a particular television program. Reading the story mimetically in accordance with these time-stamped scenes suggests how the television programs themselves dictate the characters’ actions and catalyze their spiral into unreality. While such a reading emphasizes the cultural construction of sexuality and the mediated nature of embodied desire, an over-emphasis on the chronological through-line largely obscures the complexity of sexual fantasies and practices that are revealed if we focus on “The Babysitter’s” antimimetic qualities, in particular the many narratives’ incompatibility.

The plot of “The Babysitter,” to the degree that there is one, has been neatly summarized as:

Dolly and Harry Tucker go to a Saturday evening party, and a babysitter comes to watch their three children, Jimmy, Bitsy, and a small baby (206). Nearby, the babysitter’s boyfriend Jack and his friend Mark shoot pinball and discuss the question of how to take advantage of the babysitter (208). The short story then fragments into a circus of possibilities and develops multiple, mutually incompatible plotlines out of this common situation. (Alber, Iverson, Nielson, Richardson, “Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models” [2010] 117)

“The Babysitter” devolves into no less than 107 various scenarios (Alber, et. al. [2010] 117). In *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama* (2016), Jan Alber explains how the “mutually incompatible plot lines . . . celebrate the absence of a unifying master narrative in the postmodern age” (176). Through the proliferation of these little narratives Coover “do[es] not attempt to present an overarching Truth but offer[s] a qualified, limited truth, one relative to a particular situation” (Alber, *Unnatural Narrative* 176). Given its narratologically challenging structure and innovative techniques, it’s no surprise that scholars have tended to limit their analyses to the story’s structural level at the expense of engaging with the story’s sexually explicit, at times problematic, content.

Yet utilizing narrative theory does not preclude an analysis of sexual content, and our understanding of the story is done a great injustice if we simply focus on its antimimetic structure and ignore the specificity of embodied acts in the narrative,

chalking them up to limited, relative truths of a particular situation with no larger significance or relation to embodied experience. The story's narration of a nightmarish deterioration of one evening in suburbia is rife with sexual violence that ranges from mild erotic fantasies to the pornographic eroticization of infantilized women, child sexual abuse, rape, and snuff porn. Attention to both Coover's structure and the pornographic content of his narrative reveals a new way to understand the significance of sex in Coover and sheds light on the meaning of postmodernist uses of pornography beyond the by now well-known claims about postmodern narrative structure and its tendency to blend high and low cultural forms.³³ Indeed, such attention to the sexually explicit content reveals not only the deterioration of suburban life and family values that Coover intended, but, more importantly, reveals what previous scholarship has missed: the ways in which the sexual-fantasy material escapes Coover's control. Specifically, an analysis of the text's antimimetic structure that foregrounds its representations of sexual practices and fantasies exposes the underlying queerness in "The Babysitter" that even Coover himself seems blind to.

The story's antimimeticism can primarily be found in the incompatibility of its events and its destabilization of linear narrative and narrative "truth" through Coover's repeated re-narration of the same few events. Despite such structural instability, which leaves the reader without the ability to distinguish between the variable truthfulness of events on the diegetic level, the content maintains a relatively stable focus on a few key themes, namely, the relationship among sexuality, gender, culture, and media. Since

³³ For examples of discussions of postmodernist narrative strategies regarding high and low culture see Ihab Hassan *The Postmodern Turn* and Brian McHale *Postmodernist Fiction*.

antimimetic narratives “underscor[e] . . . the artificiality of all narrative construction” and in doing so assert “the power of fictions in human existence” (Richardson, *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates* 54), the text’s pornographic explicitness in conjunction with its thematic interest in mediated culture ends up exposing and critiquing the cultural origins of gender and sexuality—whether Coover intended this or not. In other words, Coover’s antimimetic investment in the constructedness of narrative and narrative’s power to inform social, embodied experiences reveal the text’s unconscious critique of patriarchal, heteronormative narratives.

Beyond simply exposing the absence of a unifying master narrative in the postmodern age, we can read Coover against-the-grain and identify how the 107 possible scenarios of “The Babysitter” do far more than dismantle grand narratives and Truth; specifically, a queer approach reveals how the sexual-fantasy material actually works to dismantle and queer cultural discourses concerning gender and sexuality, namely those associated with heteronormativity and patriarchy. This antimimetic structure dismantles three narratives that police and construct dominant cultural understandings of gender and sexuality: 1) the romantic fantasy, 2) the de-sexualization of women and children, and 3) the unacknowledged ways in which popular and material/consumer culture contribute to the normalization of heteropatriarchal practices, particularly violence against women. It is significant that this queering is contained within Coover’s repurposing of low genres in high literature (i.e. his remediation of heteropatriarchal pornographic tropes). Coover’s ekphrastic remediations of low genres in postmodern literature extend beyond pornography and include other forms of popular media as well. To the extent that a linear, mimetic through-line exists in “The Babysitter”—seen in the six time-stamped

scenes that correspond with various television programs—the text explores how reality and our cultural narratives have come to reflect and be affected by popular culture. That each of these time stamps breaks the narrative into six sections, with the events in each subsequent section largely reflecting the specific show on television at that time, foregrounds how popular culture structures our lived experience on multiple levels: our desires and fantasies, our experiences of reality, and our perceptions and experiences of time.

For example, the pinball machine is introduced as a sexualized object in an early section focalized through Jack, who hears Mark say, “Hey, this mama’s cold, Jack baby! She needs your touch!” (Coover 208)—an invitation to action repeated much later in the text when Jack and Mark hold the babysitter down and Mark again invites Jack to play, only here the idea of play takes on a much darker and more violent tone: “C’mon, man, go! This baby’s cold! She needs your touch” (Coover 225). A similar parallelism occurs between Jack’s internal focalization while playing the pinball machine—“he can feel her warming up under his hands, the flippers suddenly coming alive, delicate rapid-fire patterns emerging in the flashing of the lights. 1000 WHEN LIT: *now!*” (Coover 210)—and Jack’s internal focalization when he is raping the babysitter—“the television lights flicker and flash over her glossy flesh. 1000 WHEN LIT. Whack! Slap! Bumper to bumper! He leans into her, feeling her come alive” (Coover 235). The phrase “she needs your touch,” where “she” refers to both the pinball machine and the babysitter, reinforces the cultural narrative of female sexual availability. Here, the text exposes the ways in which material culture draws entertainment value from the objectification of women, in this case, pinball machines, which are frequently decorated with images of pin-up girls.

Beyond Coover exposing the commodification of sexuality in postmodern culture, his antimimetic repetition of the lines noted above also focalizes how—to anachronistically apply contemporary terminology—popular and material culture perpetuate rape culture by encouraging young men to objectify and seek to control women. Here, Coover’s use of antimimeticism to explore how popular media informs quotidian experience, can—through a queer lens—also be seen as an unconscious representation of how popular culture informs embodied performances of gender and sexuality—often with violent effects. Conflating the babysitter with the machine brings into focus how the mediatization of postmodern experience reinforces the heteronormative notion that women lack subjectivity and agency and therefore lack the power to consent to or to refuse a man’s touch. Where Warhol’s reading emphasizes the text’s overt glorification of rape fantasies by arguing that there is little if any critical distance between Coover’s implied author and the sexual fantasies presented in “The Babysitter,” my queering of Coover’s text acknowledges the validity of Warhol’s claims, while arguing that the indeterminacy of Coover’s sexual fantasy material slips out of his control. In doing so, my reading against the grain demonstrates how the text also contains an implicit critique of such fantasies and their relation to mediated experience.

Throughout “The Babysitter,” we see a repetition of phrases that link consumer culture and pop culture with sexuality, highlighting the pervasiveness of sexuality in postmodern commodity culture. Furthermore, the increasing ambiguity of the narrative in terms of character focalization, which corresponds to the progressive nature of explicit violence and sexuality over the course of the narrative, establishes a connection between postmodern aesthetics and pornographic content. On the surface, Coover’s antinarrative

text deconstructs our notions of traditional storytelling and our understandings of the separation between media and reality, while the content ironically remains invested in stable understandings of hetero-patriarchal sexuality and gender norms. Thus, as it has been traditionally read, the postmodern tendencies of Coover's text occur primarily on the structural level. Scholars have tended to gloss over the actual content of the story. In doing so, previous scholarship elides the queer tension that emerges between the text's sexual-fantasy content—which reifies sexuality and gender norms—and the text's deconstructive form, which ultimately can be said to destabilize the normative sexual-fantasy content. The reification of sexuality and gender norms is most visible in the gendered differences between characters: boys and men consistently express an unslakable desire for easy sexual access to girls and women, while girls and women become objects in one of two interchangeable economies—sexual or social—their roles minimized to that of sexual objects or domestic servants.

Taken together—the sexualization of postmodern culture, the link between postmodern aesthetics and pornography, and the antimimetic blurring of fantasy and reality—reveal how Coover's (unimaginative) remediation of hetero-patriarchal pornographies belie a function beyond the prurient. Moving past how Coover's eroticization of rape and sexual violence aligns with hetero-patriarchal norms and reading against the grain reveals how the antinarrative tendencies of Coover's text eventually spiral out of his control, subverting not only traditional narrative and the boundaries between high and low art, between fantasy and reality, but ultimately subverting the social construction of gender and sexuality as well.

Throughout “The Babysitter,” the reader is unable to identify a fixed or coherent *fabula* from the narrative,³⁴ while at the same time Coover’s free indirect discourse destabilizes narrative focalization to such a degree that internal focalizations are often difficult to definitively attribute to a single, specific character. The unconsciously self-subversive nature of Coover’s shifting and ambiguous narrative focalizations enables the reader to re-evaluate and discard received narratives of female sexuality, female victimization, and sexual abuse—despite the “The Babysitter’s” apparent valorization of such patriarchal fantasies. This destabilization of sexual abuse narratives complicates our interpretation of Mr. Tucker and his erotic fantasies of raping the babysitter. Furthermore, by reading against the grain in this manner, the babysitter can simultaneously be understood as a rape victim, as an agent of her own sexual desire, and, finally, as a sexual aggressor. This expansion and extension of erotic and violent potential makes the reader aware of the types of violence that are elided by the hegemonic discourses surrounding rape, while also shedding light on the complex machinations of human desire that are proscribed by heteronormative gender roles.

The unconsciously self-subverting nature of Coover’s representations of gender and sexuality norms are highlighted in a scene that is focalized through the babysitter, when she reluctantly allows Jimmy to use the bathroom while she is in the tub. Jimmy is hesitant and tells the babysitter not to look, to which she responds, “I will if I want to” (Coover 216). The next narration of this event is ostensibly an internal focalization through Jimmy; as he spies on the babysitter in the bathroom, he sees “her big bottom as

³⁴ In *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts & Debates*, Brian Richardson explains that antimimetic narrative theory should “stress that a text’s *sjuzhet* may be fixed, variable, or multiple, while its *fabula* may be fixed, multiple, indeterminate, unknowable, or denarrated” (78).

she bends over to stir in the bubblebath. . . . Trying to see as far down as the keyhole will allow, he bumps his head on the knob. . . . ‘I—I have to go to the bathroom!’ he stammers” (Coover 217). In the next narration of this event, again focalized through the babysitter, we learn that the babysitter views Jimmy’s need to urinate as an excuse to see her in the tub: “she’s giggling inwardly at the boy’s embarrassment” (Coover 218). She then tells Jimmy, “you might as well soap my back” (Coover 218). The scene is re-narrated yet again with a focalization through Jimmy; in this instance, however, Jimmy refuses to enter the bathroom while the babysitter bathes, despite his intense need to urinate, causing Jimmy to wet his pants—“at last, she opens the door. ‘Jimmy!’ ‘I *told* you to hurry!’ he sobs. She drags him into the bathroom and pulls down his pants” (Coover 226). In this final re-narration the narrative calls into question its previous reliability or, more accurately, it enables us to question our presumptions about which character each scene is focalized through—was the scene of Jimmy spying on the babysitter told from his perspective or was the babysitter merely fantasizing about Jimmy’s desire for her, or was the babysitter retrospectively imagining a situation that excuses her possible molestation of Jimmy, because she imagines Jimmy as “wanting it,” much as the men in the story imagine her doing?

This narrative structure prevents readers from definitively attributing the competing narrations of Jimmy and the babysitter in the bathroom to one character or the other; by extension, these examples of ambiguous focalization also prevent the reader from positively attributing all of the rape fantasies to Mr. Tucker or Jack and Mark. In doing so, the antinarrative tendencies of Coover’s text present a complex portrait of the intersections between gender, sexuality, and power. In some senses, the ambiguous

focalizations undercut patriarchal notions of masculinity as virulent, violent, and powerful.³⁵ Thus, the ambiguous focalizations that are so central to Coover's postmodern deconstruction of narrative norms, also allow for a deconstruction of the social narratives surrounding gender and sexuality that Coover's text celebrates on the surface. Reading Coover's text in this way enables the reader to expand and extend sexual agency and erotic potential to a range of previously elided individuals (such as children and young women), which in turn expands our notion of female sexuality and complicates the culturally received understanding of rape narratives by questioning who has the power to be a sexual aggressor.

The competing narrations of the babysitter's bath are supplemented by several depictions of the babysitter pulling down Jimmy's pants and/or washing his penis, and each time the focalization through the babysitter reveals her fascination with his genitalia, expressed in some variation of the phrase "how tiny and rubbery it is! she thinks, soaping between the boy's legs" (Coover 210). These moments highlight the babysitter's potential as a sexual abuser: she instructs Jimmy to touch her inappropriately, she actively touches his genitals, and she eroticizes Jimmy's humiliation and her power over him. Furthermore, the ambiguously focalized narratives of these events facilitate a reading that undercuts the babysitter's intended synthetic function as a two-dimensional victim of sexual violence, merely the object of Jack's, Mark's, and Mr. Tucker's erotic fantasies. Reading for the self-subverting nature that becomes apparent through the tension between narrative content and structure reveals how the babysitter also has the power to author her

³⁵ Given the babysitter's titular role, who is to say that a great deal—if not all—of the fantasies are of her own making?

own erotic fantasies, a power that imbues the babysitter with a three-dimensional depth and destabilizes the intended narrative/social role of a “babysitter.”

The babysitter’s potential as a conduit for erotic fantasy heightens the indeterminate focalization of other narrations of sexual intimacy in the text. For instance, the short description—“door locked. Watching the TV. Under a blanket maybe. Yes, that’s right, under a blanket. Her eyes close when he kisses her. Her breasts, under both their hands, are soft and yielding” (Coover 214)—could be attributed to Mr. Tucker’s fantasy, Jack’s fantasy, the babysitter’s fantasy, or it could even be an ambiguous focalization that narrates a non-violent version of the sex between Jack, Mark, and the babysitter. It’s even possible to read this scene as the babysitter’s erotic fantasy in which the “he” and “their” remain indeterminate—potentially referring to Mr. Tucker, to Jack and Mark, to Bitsy and Jimmy, to some fantasy involving the actors on television, or even to any combination of these fantasies where “both their hands” refers to the babysitter’s own hands and someone else’s. By acknowledging that the text allows us to read this passage as the babysitter’s fantasy in which her objects of desire remain unknowable and myriad, we can see how the sexual possibilities begin to spiral out of Coover’s control, so much so that this passage could be said to deconstruct dominant gender and sexuality norms that police and elide the multiplicity of female desires.

This same untagged and decontextualized moment, in which a man and a woman watch TV with the door locked and “her eyes close when he kisses her. Her breasts, under both their hands, are soft and yielding” (Coover 214), might even be read as a prolepsis to the final vignette in which Dolly lies in the arms of the party host as he twists “the buttered strands of her ripped girdle between his fingers” and she suggests that they

“see what’s on the late late movie” (Coover 239). Focusing on the details of characters’ desires in Coover’s story even enables a resistant reading in which Dolly becomes the unsung protagonist of “The Babysitter.” Dolly’s repeated expression of frustration with Harry Tucker,³⁶ her positive descriptions of the party host, and her awareness of the host’s sexual desire for her, makes possible a queerly positive and erotic interpretation of the story’s seemingly morbid end. Though in one of the text’s conclusions Dolly’s “children are murdered, your husband gone, a corpse in your bathtub, and your house is wrecked” (Coover 239), we might also note that in this ending Dolly becomes liberated from all the domestic impediments that frustrated her own sexual agency. This reading is underscored by her desire to watch “the late late movie” in bed with the party host, which could suggest that Dolly won’t be returning home and that she intends to sleep with the man she has fantasized about all evening.

Throughout the story, the oscillating and indeterminate focalizations also collapse the distinctions between various levels of the text. “The Babysitter” presents three distinct levels of narration: 1) narration of the present moment; 2) narration/re-mediation of television programs (a musical, a western, a spy show, a love story, a murder mystery, and the news); and 3) internal focalization through different characters, which is further divided between the characters’ perceptions of the present moment and their internal (unrealized?) fantasies. The narrative’s foregrounding of fiction’s constructedness, which reveals the constructedness of social narratives, contains within it a critique of gender roles and their socially constructed origins. This is highlighted through the text’s

³⁶ For example, when Dolly stares at Harry during the party and thinks to herself how “he’s spreading out through the middle, so why the hell does he have to complain about her all the time?” (Coover 212).

incorporation of television shows that blend into the storyworld until the reader is unable to distinguish between the narration of a television program and the actual progression of the narrative in the primary storyworld. This bleeding across narrative levels becomes especially apparent when comparing the opening television broadcast of a romantic musical—in which “He loves her. She loves him. . . . He smiles in a pulsing crescendo of sincerity and song” (Coover 208)—with the subsequent deterioration of the romantic plot and domestic bliss. The deterioration begins with Dolly Tucker’s disillusioned view of married life, “He loves her. She loves him. And then the babies come. . . . Dishes. Noise. Clutter. And fat. Not just tight, her girdle actually hurts” (Coover 209). Later, as the television programs become more sexualized and violent, the two narrative levels will actually collapse, like when the narrative focuses on a man defending a crying and sexually violated girl—“the bastard goes for her, but he tackles him. They roll and tumble . . .” (Coover 212), which could refer to the television program the babysitter is watching or to the scene later in the text when Jack defends the babysitter from Mark’s advances. Though the reader cannot always positively identify which characters or events a scene might refer to, Coover’s incorporation and reconfiguration of television programming highlights the gap between lived experience and fictional narratives. Moreover, this entanglement of reality and fiction makes visible the (un)conscious ideological power of normative narratives in the media to influence embodied action, and in doing so, the text explores the concomitant alienation and dissatisfaction that stems from never achieving the cultural standards represented in the media.

Indeed, the metafictionality of Coover’s work repeatedly emphasizes his investment in interrogating and deconstructing “the human need for pattern” and how

“every effort to speak of the world, involves a kind of fiction-making process” which has real effects on how we perceive and experience reality (“Robert Coover on His Own and Other Fictions: An Interview” 68). That Coover’s story becomes one in which characters and readers are ultimately unable to distinguish between the televised narratives and those occurring in the Tucker household, and in which the characters fail to significantly differentiate between the babysitter and a pinball machine, demonstrates the mediated nature of our lived experiences. More specifically, these examples of indeterminacy suggest the interrelatedness between televised pop culture narratives and individuals’ experiences of sexual desire/fantasy; in doing so, Coover’s narrative comes to reflect the degree to which rape culture and the objectification of women permeate our everyday lives as a result of the mediation of experience in the postmodern era. However, the question remains as to whether these destabilizing effects of Coover’s explicit sexual content are enough to counterbalance the text’s surface-level endorsement of hetero-patriarchal fantasies, with which previous scholarship has taken issue.

For instance, Warhol reads the babysitter’s lack of a name as underscoring her lack of subjectivity and her function as an object of violent, male sexual fantasies throughout the narrative.³⁷ Though such claims might seem to complicate my interpretation of “The Babysitter” as a text that unconsciously contains a subversion and critique of heteronormative culture, juxtaposing “The Babysitter” with queer SM pornography challenges Warhol’s suppositions. To the extent that “The Babysitter”—in classic postmodernist fashion—makes use of the conventions of popular genres like

³⁷ From Warhol’s “A Feminist Narratological Take on Robert Coover’s ‘The Babysitter,’” which was presented through Project Narrative at The Ohio State University in March 2014.

pornography, we can problematize the idea that the babysitter's namelessness signals her status as an object within the narrative.

Given Coover's reliance on "material drawn mainly from cultural stereotypes and myths, television shows, and pornographic clichés" (McCaffery, *Metafictional Muse* 75), it makes sense to interrogate whether or not the babysitter's namelessness might be read in terms of pornographic tropes. Thinking about "The Babysitter" and the genre of pornography shifts our approach to Coover's story away from the conventions of canonical fiction in which, as Warhol rightly observes, a character's lack of a name often indicates a lack of subjectivity as well. A brief comparison between "The Babysitter" and practitioner-produced SM pornography complicates this presumption about the babysitter's (lack of) subjectivity and namelessness. For example, in John Preston's classic short story collection, *I Once Had A Master* (1984),³⁸ we find a very intimate story, "Interludes," about a dominant man meeting a submissive "boy" at the Mineshaft, which turns into far more than a one-night sexual encounter. Though the main characters remain nameless, their interiority is extensively developed—both through the sexual fantasies they explore and through their deepening understanding of each others' motivations and emotions. In Preston, the characters' namelessness preserves the surface illusion that the story is about an anonymous, sexual encounter, while the details of the

³⁸ I have chosen to use Preston's story as my point of comparison simply because his writing forms such a central part of my dissertation, although I acknowledge that—given the date of publication—these specific texts could in no way have influenced Coover's understanding of pornographic tropes. However, one can easily find relevant examples in earlier pornography that support the idea that in pornographic literature, characters with names are not significantly more likely to be rounded characters imbued with subjectivity than their nameless counterparts. For example, the Marquis de Sade's titular character in *Justine* entirely lacks development and depth, she has few identifying characteristics aside from her obstinate dedication to religious morality, and she remains impervious to change over the course of over 250 pages. Or think of the nameless protagonists in Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye* or Pauline Réage's *The Story of O*, where protagonists are lacking in names but not in fully rounded characterization. One even finds fully developed, but nameless, characters in canonical literature, like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

narrative itself complicate the cultural assumption that anonymous cruising in SM clubs is necessarily without deep and meaningful connection between the two partners.³⁹

Finally, it is also possible to read the babysitter's lack of a name as further evidence of how Coover's story can be interpreted as undermining heteronormative narratives and social constructs. Instead of signaling her lack of subjectivity within Coover's narrative world, the babysitter's namelessness could just as easily signal her unique freedom and sexual agency. Such a reading suggests that the babysitter's objectifying namelessness can also be understood as an unconscious deconstruction of patriarchal understandings of women as sexually available blank slates on which men are free to project their fantasies. While all of the named characters seem to fit squarely into specific pre-defined, gendered roles that remain stable throughout the text, the babysitter's internal focalizations and her shifting performances of both gender and desire are the most inconsistent of any character within the narrative. Though there are indeed shifts in Mr. Tucker's, Jack's, and Mark's fantasies, these changes are a question of degree and not of kind, as Warhol observes. For instance, Mr. Tucker imagining the acquiescence of the babysitter to his advances and her cooperation, "her eyes close when he kisses her. Her breasts, *under both their hands*, are soft and yielding" (emphasis mine 214), progresses to Mr. Tucker finding the babysitter in the bathroom and raping her: "he embraces her savagely . . . pushing something between her legs, hurting her. She slips,

³⁹ See the following chapter for a discussion about Preston's thoughts on how SM creates a level of immediate intimacy that one doesn't generally find while cruising in other contexts. The following chapter also discusses Califia's "The Surprise Party," which offers another example of a protagonist with a well-developed interiority, despite their namelessness.

they both slip—something cold and hard slams her in the back, cracks her skull” (234-5)—which Warhol sees as an escalation from statutory rape to violent rape.

In contrast, the various narrative scenarios which are closely linked to the babysitter’s perspective vary wildly—from her shifting engagement with different genres of television programs, to the proliferation of actions that occur between her and the children. Unlike the named characters in the story, the babysitter has not yet settled into a single, culturally-defined role. From the entitlement of suburban brats, to the hetero-misogyny of Mr. Tucker, to the “long-suffering wife” persona found in Dolly—each of the named characters occupies a gendered role that is predefined within heteronormative culture. Moreover, the fact that each of the named female characters have infantilizing, even objectifying names (Dolly and Bitsy), reinforces how patriarchal culture constructs female subjectivity as a mode of oppressive objectification. That the baby is the only other unnamed character in the text supports this resistant reading that sees namelessness in the narrative as a way of signaling someone whose subjectivity is not yet fully formed, not yet locked into a prescribed heteronormative role.

The relative freedom of the babysitter is interesting since, unlike the baby, the babysitter is able to demonstrate her (sexual) agency and perform this outsideness through her questioning, exploration, and experimentation with various sexual fantasies and aspects of gendered embodiment. For example, we can see a queering and destabilization of gender and sexuality norms through a comparison of two of her internal focalizations: first, when she is giving Jimmy a bath and soaping his genitals, she thinks how it’s “just a funny jiggly little thing that looks like it shouldn’t even be there at all. Is

that what all the songs are about?” (210-11);⁴⁰ and, second, when the babysitter tries on Harry Tucker’s underwear and “runs her hand inside the opening in front, pulls out her thumb. How funny it must feel!” (218). Over the course of the evening, we see her try on (literally in the case of underwear), fantasize about, and perform a variety of gendered and sexual subjectivities. Indeed, she is the only character who resignifies and disrupts predefined positionalities to any meaningful degree.

DON QUIXOTE

As articulated above, explicit representations of violent sex in postmodern fiction have been condemned by scholars who have tended to read such representations as male pornographic fantasies that are decidedly misogynist.⁴¹ When scholars allow for the possibility of a progressive politics within such representations, their studies tend to be limited to a single author, like Kathy Acker, and they tend to de-eroticize the explicit sexual content by reading it as a parody or social commentary that—it is implied—has nothing to do with actual (consensual) sexual practices.⁴² Even when scholars explore the significance of sadism, masochism, and violent sex in Acker’s fiction, they tend to de-

⁴⁰ Significantly, the babysitter’s question—“is that what all the songs are about?”—implies that she is a virgin and that perhaps this is her first encounter with male genitalia. Moving from this assumption, we might reinterpret some of the problematic (i.e. male) sexual fantasies that imagine the babysitter as “wanting it,” by acknowledging how these fantasies are just as likely focalized through the babysitter as they are through any of the male characters. Having had no prior sexual experiences, it would be natural for the babysitter’s initial fantasies to align with the (patriarchal) representations of sexuality she has encountered through media and culture; acknowledging this underscores the babysitter’s subjectivity by giving us insight into her nascent sexual desires (as opposed to presuming the majority of fantasies are focalized through one of the male characters and thus operate by objectifying the babysitter). This is only a partial recuperation because the fantasies themselves still problematically reify patriarchal gender norms, female objectification, and male power—all of which are valid erotic fodder for consenting adults, yet the babysitter’s inexperience (and age) render her unable to safely or consensually explore such desires.

⁴¹ See especially, Chapter Four and my discussion of these tendencies in Pynchon scholarship.

⁴² Ironically, this is the same implausible justification that Burroughs deploys in order to “rescue” his own representations of sex and violence from the censor.

emphasize the pleasurable aspects of such practices, their relationship to embodied experiences, and their underlying queerness.

The frequency of discussions of sadomasochistic sex and politics in Acker criticism makes it relatively unique within postmodern scholarship, with a significant number of critics identifying the feminist critique that underlies Acker's representations of sex and violence and SM. For example, Suzette Henke claims that "in constructing a corrosive parody of female sadomasochism, [Acker] deliberately incorporates into her (anti)ethical aesthetic (a style both ethically charged and self-consciously anarchic) a subversive political agenda geared to mimic and 'de-doxify' erotic violence" (93). However, Henke is by no means the first to attribute a politically motivated social critique to Acker's representations of sex and violence.⁴³ Despite the critical function identified in Acker's representations of violence and sex, which critics have used to attach a higher order meaning to her pornographic representations, this body of scholarship has frequently pathologized aberrant sexual practice in Acker's work by relying on a psychoanalytic lens. For example, Henke goes so far as to cite the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistics Manual* in order to explain how "the female protagonists in both *Don Quixote* and *Blood and Guts* have suffered sexual trauma . . . and both seem to exhibit . . . post-traumatic stress disorder. . . . The female Quixote acts out repetition-compulsion experiences through sadomasochistic behaviors,

⁴³ Henke cites Kevin Floyd's argument that Acker's parodic and stereotypical representations of female masochism reveal such stereotypes as "fictitious cultural constructions" and that Acker "denaturalizes and exposes" these conventions (Henke 93). Indeed, in "Deconstructing Masochism in Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts* in *High School* and Joyce Carol Oates's *You Must Remember This*," Floyd writes that "Kathy Acker's fictions are parodic narratives of socially and culturally sanctioned injustice. . . . Her texts can be read as allegories which enact the concretization, the embodiment, of relatively abstract, cultural violence—the violence of gendered ideologies in particular" (60).

and Janey Smith courts compulsive re-exposure situations reminiscent of incest trauma and Oedipal abuse” (94).

In accounting for the prominence of SM and sadomasochistic representations in Acker’s work, critics have felt the need to call upon a whole slew of diverse theoretical apparatuses and in doing so critics have fundamentally sanitized Acker’s pornographic representations of their erotic impulses. Most critics have interpreted Acker’s sexually explicit content primarily as a method of social critique, which makes such representations’ sadomasochistic aspects merely incidental to Acker’s larger political aims. These interpretations problematically elide the significance of embodied pleasure and queer, female sexual agency in Acker’s work, allowing critics to maintain the fiction that Acker’s explicit and jarring representations of violence and sex are anything but that.

Articles on Acker and sadomasochism frequently quote from an interview with Andrea Juno published in *Angry Women* (1991) in which Acker explains how women were taught to channel anger, rage, feelings of insecurity—to channel what would-be ‘negative’ energy *masochistically*. We were taught not to do it *directly*—not to go out and hit someone, for example—but to do it so we’d hurt *ourselves*. And that’s a typically feminine ploy to deal with power . . . in a way it’s because you *don’t* have power [. . .] I think this is a bit how art is created. Julia Kristeva has written a book, *Powers of Horror*, about this [. . .] art comes from a gesture of power turned against itself. (qtd. in Redding 288-9)⁴⁴

⁴⁴ This same quotation can also be found in Suzette Henke and Linda Kauffman, to name only a few scholars who cite this specific passage.

The possibility of queer pleasure is entirely lacking in this body of scholarship; indeed, there is no acknowledgement that Acker's representations of sex and violence are conceivably linked to embodied (queer) practices and are not, as critics would have it, solely instances of metaphoric re-exposure to sexual trauma or parodic exaggerations of sexual activity in a patriarchal society. By tying Acker's sadomasochistic representations to her critiques of patriarchal society and its traumatic impact on female bodies, scholars pathologize sexual variation in a way that ignores Acker's commitment to sexual freedom and her own theorization about the pleasure and utility of SM, which she discusses at length in the very same interview quoted above.

To begin with, Acker does not only associate pain or masochism with the constraints society has placed on women and forced them to "enjoy," as critics who have quoted the above passage from the Juno interview seem to imply. Rather, Acker identifies multiple functions for SM and for pain more generally. Pain can be a sign of growth—physical growth, as it is in tattooing (which Acker focuses on in *Empire of the Senseless*) and in body-building where muscle burn is necessary for muscle building, or mental and spiritual growth, as in a rite of passage where pain can "shock you into another level of awareness" (qtd. in "Interview with Andrea Juno" 180); it can also be a way to liberate oneself in that "if you learn how to deal with physical pain, you can deal with what's really much greater pain" (qtd. in "Interview with Andrea Juno" 180). Perhaps most importantly, Acker understands SM specifically as form of play that produces knowledge, since "there's a way in which you play with what you most fear in order to learn how to deal with it" (qtd. in "Interview with Andrea Juno" 180). For Acker, SM is not only a way of gaining knowledge of the unknown, but it's also a method of

gaining self-knowledge, where you engage in SM because “you’re curious about your body—how will your body react to this? And it’s not only just pain, it’s also how you’ll react in terms of being *controlled*” (qtd. in “Interview with Andrea Juno” 180).

Significantly, Acker draws a sharp distinction between female submission to patriarchal power and the potential for masochistic pleasure in an SM context. Acker explains that “submissive women freak me out” since “they’re going to abide by society’s rules and hide in their nice suburban house and do just what they’re told and they’re not going to step out of line” (qtd. in “Interview with Andrea Juno” 181). Acker contrasts this capitulation to normatively constructed gender roles with her own physical desires and their vocal expression, where she has to convince men to spank her instead of giving her oral sex: “here I’d say I’m not being submissive at all! I’m trying to make *them* submissive to what *I* want” (qtd. in “Interview with Andrea Juno” 181). Acker elaborates this point through the SM adage, “the masochist is in control, and to some extent that has to be true. Because if the masochist isn’t controlling, then its rape or some horror story or it’s a crime” (qtd. in “Interview with Andrea Juno” 181). Thus, Acker’s self-knowledge, rooted in her own embodied pleasures, and her knowledge of SM community discourses explains how Acker can emphatically deny the idea that she or her protagonists are submissive: “No one who knows me calls me submissive; just people who read my books get on this track: ‘All the women are so submissive.’ Well—not really!” (qtd. in “Interview with Andrea Juno” 180). Despite the physical pleasures of masochism that Acker or her protagonists might enjoy, both she and her protagonists bristle at the constraints of normativity in their daily lives and instead of silently

conforming to expected female roles, they actively search for meaning through embodied pleasure (“Interview with Andrea Juno” 181).

Furthermore, Acker’s theorization of SM in this interview emphasizes its underlying queerness, the fact that “sex is so unique from person to person” and the way that this self-knowledge about one’s unique body/desire enables one to move beyond phallogentric, genital pleasures. Like SM in practitioner-produced texts and like Foucault’s understanding of SM as a creative force, Acker identifies SM as a mode of “*play* . . . an area where you can investigate certain things with some realm of safety” (qtd. in “Interview with Andrea Juno” 182), which enables one to access the full breadth of polymorphously perverse pleasures. For example, Acker explains how telling a lover to spank her or handing them a whip is an example of her sexual agency: “Now that’s not like I’m some victim or I’m being submissive; this is *my* body” (qtd. in “Interview with Andrea Juno” 180). Acker knows that her body prefers non-genital stimulation.

Critics’ tendency to unconsciously pathologize SM in Acker by reading it solely as a commentary on patriarchal society or on sexual violence against women, relies on the problematic logic of repudiation, which scholars so often apply to queer sexual practices in postmodern fiction. Judith Butler explains how “this logic of repudiation installs heterosexual love as the origin and truth of both drag and lesbianism, and it interprets both practices as symptoms of thwarted love. But what is displaced in this explanation of displacement is the notion that there might be pleasure, desire, and love that is not solely determined by what it repudiates” (*Bodies That Matter* 87). In much the same way, critics identify the privileged gender binary as the motivating force that underlies Acker’s SM scenes, emphasizing how her texts invariably seek—and fail to

find—the possibility of sexual equality in our culture. Acker acknowledges that men have historically “used women’s sexualities and sexual needs and desires in order to control women” (*Bodies of Work* 130), and yet Acker remains committed to pleasures and desires that are not determined by repudiation, or in Acker’s words, “heterosexual women find themselves in a double-bind: If they want to fight sexism, they must deny their own sexualities. At the same time, feminism cannot be about the denial of any female sexuality” (*Bodies of Work* 130). Here, Acker advocates for a sexual liberationist philosophy that evades social control on both the left and the right (i.e. feminist political correctness and male control, respectively), in addition to vindicating heterosexual female desire and desires that might be viewed as less than politically correct. In her fiction, Acker anchors her exploration of sexuality in female subjectivity and refutes the sexist presumption that there is an inherent relationship between heterosexual female desire for men and men’s historical power.

As a self-proclaimed literary “pirate,” Acker’s texts might be said to exemplify postmodern heteroglossia, particularly with her plagiaristic style that reworks literary classics. *Don Quixote* (1986) can be characterized as a feminist, punk, and/or postmodern rewriting of Cervantes’s classic, with the titular protagonist questing after the impossible: “love.” Over the course of her quest, the narrator Don Quixote, who becomes “partly male” (Acker, *DQ* 29), struggles with a broken marriage, her mother’s suicide, and her relationship to madness and normalcy. Sexual violence occurs throughout the narrative, from St. Simeon’s narration of the group anal rapes he experienced at a Catholic boys school, to Don Quixote’s experience of an abortion as a violation, to women’s relationships to phallogentric language, literature, and even history—““Be assured,”” Don

Quixote reads, “that the history of women is that of degradation and suffering” (Acker, *DQ* 29).

Acker’s polyphonic style, which she uses to narrate the quest of Don Quixote and her sidekick St. Simeon, who turns into a dog, is defined by its intertextuality and its proliferating multiplicity of texts within texts. For instance, “A DOG’S LIFE, cont.: AN EXAMINATION OF WHAT KIND OF SCHOOLING WOMEN NEED,” presented as a book that St. Simeon reads, turns out to be a loose retelling of the opening chapters of Sade’s *Justine*. Indeed, my study of Acker focuses on *Don Quixote* precisely for its extended retelling of Sade; though sadomasochistic elements can be found across all of Acker’s work, *Don Quixote*’s “plagiarizing” of Sade makes overt the centrality of sadomasochism to Acker’s postmodern aesthetic and politics. Throughout *Don Quixote*, Acker deconstructs the structuring binaries of language, such as self/other, subject/object, and pleasure/pain, to name a few. Furthermore, Acker insists on the power and value of desire, privileging the experience of orgasm, even when it is attained through pain, as a mode of liberation within the body that potentially has the power to restructure or dismantle the outside world. A focus on the specificity of sexual acts in *Don Quixote* and its pornographic intertexts reveals the underlying queerness of Acker’s work, which is summarily overlooked by critics.

Academic scholarship on Acker’s *Don Quixote* tends to sanitize her explicit representations of violent sex, though not all critics identify Acker’s representations of female masochism as a grotesque extension of patriarchal logic meant to undermine patriarchal culture. For Christina Milletti, Acker’s

work appears to identify the heterogeneity of sexual praxes she embraces as both similar and singular: each is governed, she suggests, by the normative codes of the sex/gender system that both constitute and constrain their subjects. It is the codes themselves that are her target—the social order that controls normative constructions of identity. (361)

Nevertheless, the sanitizing of Acker's pornographic representations can also be found in Milletti who, like scholars before her, inevitably finds the graphic representations of sex to be of secondary importance, merely one small facet of a larger, more significant, and invariably desexualized project. For Milletti, the reader's affective response to Acker's "transgressive prose" is far more important than the acts themselves: "Such passages are commonplace in her work—the content merely changes. For instance . . . one can identify the similar rhetoric of shock Acker promotes with regard to rape, anal sex, and suicide" (362). Milletti goes on to offer extended quotations from *Empire of the Senseless*, *Don Quixote*, and *My Mother: Demonology*. What is striking about Milletti's critical approach is that it identifies—in her own words—rape, anal sex, and suicide as equivalencies. What Milletti misses in her selective quotation from *Don Quixote* is the pleasure the narrator ascribes to Eddie in a scene when Don Quixote penetrates him: "He groans very loudly so I know he's receiving tons of pleasure. Peter's asshole's too tight for my finger to wiggle up and I don't want to force anyone to do sexually what they don't seem to want to do" (Acker, *DQ* 56). Indeed, this relatively mild (though explicitly erotic) passage from *Don Quixote* differs significantly in content from the other quotations Milletti cites, like the violent anal rape described in *Empire of the Senseless* and the grotesque suicide from *My Mother: Demonology* in which "Francesca's body hung from

a long Tampax string[. . .] Her blood streamed out of every part of her and made all of the apartment smell like bleeding cunt. A jagged piece of glass had cut her hymen” (qtd. in Milletti 362). Both of these passages are arguably more shock-inducing than the passage from *Don Quixote*—particularly the latter, with its taboo references to both self-harm and menstruation.⁴⁵

The *Don Quixote* passage that Milletti quotes as an example of “shock” is certainly shocking, but not in the way Milletti implies. In fact, that passage’s emphasis on pleasure and consent, its illustration of sexual equality between the sexes in terms of both sexual acts (penetration) and desires, makes it relatively unique in Acker’s oeuvre. What is shocking in the Eddie passage from *Don Quixote* is not the anal fingering, but rather that critics have failed to notice what an exemplary illustration it is of Acker’s politics, best described by Robert Walsh (though not in reference to this scene):

for Acker, the central issue of feminism is the need to affirm female sexuality without accepting the social determination this sexuality implies in a male-dominated society. To her, it is the fundamental paradox of feminist dissent. . . . Acker’s feminism is not a definitive condemnation of sexual relations. She always seeks to recuperate some viable form for

⁴⁵ Milletti’s emphasis on a poetics of shock fundamentally works against Acker’s own self-conceptions about her writing. Acker explains in an interview with Larry McCaffery that she’s never “written with the idea of shocking anyone, except really minorly” (qtd. in “An Interview with Kathy Acker” 92). Acker goes on to elaborate that despite the incidental presence of shock-effect in her work, it is far easier to break a reader’s habits and perceptions by “the breaking of taboos, or through transgressions” (qtd. in “An Interview with Kathy Acker” 92), which Acker deploys in both her form and content. Furthermore, Acker differentiates shock from the breaking of readerly habits and perceptions through transgression or taboo, noting how “the people in our culture positively *live* off shock in our media, we feed on it, but this doesn’t seem to have any positive effects in the sense of helping people to break perceptual habits” (qtd. in “An Interview with Kathy Acker” 92).

them and repudiates the separatist tendency in feminism, preferring the dangerous quest for a liberated heterosexuality. (158)⁴⁶

However, both Milletti and Walsh overlook the queer pleasures in Acker's pornographic representations—with Milletti using such quotations solely to discuss their shock value and Walsh limiting his interpretation of Acker's sexual-pornographic project to heterosexual relations, despite the innumerable scenes of queer sex and Acker's own (self-)identification as queer.⁴⁷

By dismissing Don Quixote's quest as a futile other-directed pursuit (Walsh) and by ignoring the specificity of acts detailed in Acker's "shocking" representations (Milletti), both critics fail to see the productive nature of Acker's insistence on politically (in)correct sex.⁴⁸ For example, in her discussion of the anal play scene from *Don Quixote*, Milletti overlooks the significance of Acker's representation of women as sexual penetrators of men. Here, Acker's pornographic representations reveal pleasure as a tool for deconstructing gender norms and essentialist binaries. This scene can also be read as one of "a few places in *Don Quixote* where [Acker] was dealing with Andrea Dworkin . . . an attack . . . on her dualistic argument that men are responsible for all the evil in the world. . . . [Dworkin's] views go beyond sexism. She blames the act of penetration in sexual intercourse. I find that not only mad but dangerous" (Acker qtd. in "A Conversation with Kathy Acker" 13).

⁴⁶ It is important to note, however, that Walsh ultimately finds Acker's quest futile, explaining that "her characters are vulnerable and desperate: they have no autonomy but are almost wholly other-directed" (158).

⁴⁷ In her "Interview with Andrea Juno," Acker recalls speaking with a lesbian friend who said "'women who are gay are really outlaws because we're totally outside the society—*always*.' And I said, 'What about people like me?' and she said, 'Oh, you're just queer,' (182)" (qtd. in Redding 297).

⁴⁸ For Acker's discussion of politically incorrect sex and her shifting relation to American feminism, see "An Interview with Kathy Acker" with Larry McCaffery the *Mississippi Review* (especially pages 95-98).

Furthermore, it is significant that Milletti overlooks how the “shock-value” of Acker’s work would have operated within its historical context, namely the sex wars of the 1980s. In contrast to the late 1960s when Coover published “The Babysitter” at a time when “American society seemed to have reached a new accommodation with the erotic” and “standards of appropriate behavior and middle-class cultural values came under attack” (D’Emilio & Freedman 300), Acker’s provocative work was published in a period marked by a renewed polarization over sexual issues: “By the end of the 1970s, conservative proponents of an older sexual order had appeared” (D’Emilio & Freedman 343), along with a renewed privileging of the nuclear family during the Reagan era. As noted in my Introduction, the rise of the New Right coincided with the sex wars, a period from the late 1970s to early 90s, consisting of a series of contentious debates amongst (lesbian-)feminists over sexuality, pornography, and censorship that would gain national attention. The sex wars were largely a product of two overlapping historical contexts: first, “efforts to combat sexual violence,” which had been “a major focus of feminist energy in the 1970s” (D’Emilio & Freedman 350-1), and second, the rise of lesbian feminism and political lesbians, the latter of which “originated in the idea that feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice” and problematically “encouraged many women who are not sexually attracted to women to consider themselves lesbians” (Rubin, *Coming to Power* 214). During this period there were “heated disagreements about pornography, butch-femme lesbian identity, public sex, transgenderism, sex work, monogamy, heterosexuality, bisexuality, dildo use, and in fact any sort of vaginal penetration for sexual stimulation” (Khan 54). Yet, as noted in the Introduction, the most

polarizing issue was the controversy over SM, which largely overlapped with the disputes concerning pornography and its censorship.

Situating Acker's work in this context gives new meaning to the "shock-value" of Acker's pornographic representations that Milletti focuses on. Specifically, a great deal of anti-pornography rhetoric relied on a slippery slope argument that juxtaposed images of consensual SM with images of actual crimes committed against women in order to imply "that sadomasochism is the underlying and essential 'truth' towards which all pornography tends. Porn is thought to lead to S/M porn which in turn is alleged to lead to rape" (Rubin, "Thinking Sex" 298). Rubin goes on to explain how this decontextualization of SM imagery often makes such imagery appear "shocking. This shock-value was mercilessly exploited to scare audiences into accepting the anti-porn perspective" ("Thinking Sex" 298). Indeed, Acker's postmodern heteroglossia and plagiaristic tendencies result in a fractured collage-like text that repeatedly dips in and out of a variety of narratives without expository transitions. Thus, the lack of context surrounding Acker's pornographic representations serves to heighten their shock-effect. In this sense, Acker's "plagiarism" appears to move beyond a remediation of content, like with her adaptation of Sade's *Juliette*, by operating on a structural level as well: reading Acker through the rhetoric of the sex wars brings to light the parallels between Acker's fiction and the SM discourse of the period, perhaps even suggesting how *Don Quixote* ironically mimics the decontextualizing tendencies found in anti-pornography slide shows, pamphlets, and texts. Specifically, the structure of Acker's plagiarizing tactics—her repurposing of shocking erotic content from other sources often without any framing context within the narrative—appears to replicate the strategies of anti-porn feminism.

Whether intentional or not, the ironic effects of these decontextualizing strategies further link Acker's work to other pro-SM discourse of the period. In much the same way, lesbian practitioner-produced SM literature often "relied on the strategies of satirizing the criticisms launched by the anti-s/m side" (Khan 95) and used "erotic parody" to reveal that "the unwitting effect of anti-s/m feminist rhetoric on . . . s/m practitioners was that it in fact offered erotic fodder through its shaming tactics and political denunciations" (Khan 108, 111).

Beyond these thematic and stylistic overlaps with pro-sex lesbian SM discourse, we can also illuminate the underlying queerness of Acker's work by turning to recent queer theorizations of SM. Analyzing *Don Quixote* in terms of a contemporary theoretical framework restores the importance of non-normative sexuality to her oeuvre and acknowledges the relationship between Acker's pornographic representations and embodied experiences and pleasures. In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Halberstam theorizes unacknowledged, liberatory modes of subjectivity and queer practice, identifying shadow feminism, the queer art of failure, and masochism as three modes of oppositional politics that feminist critics frequently marginalize and condemn as internalized oppressive practices rooted in false consciousness—critical tendencies that are rooted in the anti-SM/porn rhetoric of the sex wars. Halberstam rejects the idea that such stigmatized practices originate in false consciousness, much like the lesbian SM discourse during the sex wars in which "a corporeal epistemology, was put forth that attempted to challenge the anti-s/m side's blanket portrayal of physical desire as an overdetermined product of patriarchal conditioning" (Khan 94). Additionally, Halberstam takes up Bersani's notion of masochistic *jouissance* and "self-shattering" in order to posit

masochism as a form of radical passivity that critiques proscriptive forms of agency (*Queer Art* 136). In doing so, Halberstam's work is key for refuting the reigning critical consensus that regards masochism in Acker's work as an undesirable practice representing (and protesting) "the double-bind of patriarchal, D/S society" (Peters 154). Such readings elide Acker's construction of queer SM as a destabilizing force, particularly in her "plagiarizing" pornographies.

In the second section of "A DOG'S LIFE, cont.: AN EXAMINATION OF WHAT KIND OF SCHOOLING WOMEN NEED," entitled, "2. Reading: I Dream My Schooling," we find Acker's reworking of Sade's *Juliette*, but with an exclusive focus on the female characters. Significantly, this retelling of the Sadean narrative is framed as an embedded narrative within an embedded narrative, making it doubly removed from the primary quest narrative since its narration occurs within the Dog's telling of her/his story to Don Quixote. This retelling begins with the dog saying, "I sat in a chair and read" (Acker, *DQ* 162).⁴⁹ Like the original Sade, the story is focalized through Juliette's perspective and in these opening scenes Juliette's desire for Laure (Laurette in Sade) is the driving narrative force.⁵⁰ For example, Juliette tells how Laure's love "has forced her

⁴⁹ Though framed as a book St. Simeon once read, it is unclear whether the Sadean reworkings represent the actual content of the book St. Simeon reads, St. Simeon's misrecollection or intentional re-working of the Sade text (s)he read, or the narrator's/Don Quixote's refiguration of the original Sade.

⁵⁰ It is worth mentioning that much of Acker's Sadean retelling is structured by "the triple and quadruple repetition of each paragraph" (Walsh 157). According to Walsh, the repetitions cease when "Juliette is able to articulate the contradictions of her sexuality and social identity" (157). However, if we compare the structure of Acker's Sadean retelling with the original *Juliette*, we find that these repetitions have an additional and perhaps more significant function, since such a comparison reveals what is absent in Acker's text: the male libertines' extended philosophical and political diatribes. By repeating each paragraph multiple times, Acker reemphasizes Juliette's perspective and her embodied experience. In doing so, Acker has essentially replaced the repetitious philosophizing of the male libertine that disrupts the explicit pornographic action and its focalization through Juliette. Perhaps then such repetitions do not mimic "repetition-compulsion experiences" as Henke suggests, but rather the repetitions work to displace the un-

helpless in my face. Cords fastened to the wood stools fixed to the floor spread her legs open, as far as is comfortable for her. Since she through her love's open to me, inside her I'll be softer than her, less of an identity. As I'll make her come, I'll fade. This isn't possible, though I know she loves me" (Acker, *DQ* 173). Halberstam's description of antisocial feminism as that which "dedicates itself completely and ferociously to the destruction of self and other" (*Queer Art* 138), clarifies the queer affect underlying Juliette's words. Indeed, the implications of Juliette's speech seem to correspond directly with Halberstam's theorization of masochism and passivity as modes for undoing normative notions of the subject and her relation to political power.

The queer negativity that underscores Acker's representations of non-normative sexual practices, can also be seen in Juliette's conversation with Laure:

'They've taught us that, above all, our bodies, especially that part of our body, should be hidden. . . . Cunt, you are an asocial cunt. I'm going to have to whip you badly, cunt.'

'Oh yes,' Laure answered, 'whip me badly.' (Acker, *DQ* 173)

Here again we find an overt inclusion of consent and an articulation of desire in a sadomasochistic scene, which brings to mind not only the narrator's discussion of anally penetrating Eddie, but also an earlier whipping scene between Villebranche and De Franville that emphasizes consent and an eagerness to be whipped on the part of the submissive partner. However, Nicola Pitchford distinguishes between the Villebranche/De Franville SM scene and the Sadean retelling, since in the latter "both partners are now

erotic male discourse that interrupts the focus on Juliette's embodied sexual experiences in the original Sade.

female” which gives rise to a “new equalizing of power” (28). Pitchford incorrectly presumes an inherent equality solely based on the gender of participants in the sexual act, a presumption that harkens back to anti-porn lesbian feminist rhetoric of the 1970s and their essentialist notions of gender. This type of presumption has been problematized extensively within lesbian SM discourse, which emphasizes how all human relations are imbued with power dynamics and SM enables one to overtly acknowledge and explore these dynamics.

In contrast, many anti-SM lesbian feminist texts rely on an assumption that female same-sex relations inherently model equality and are thus corrupted by even the slightest hint of roleplaying. In doing so, anti-SM discourse occludes the power dynamics that inhere in every human interaction to some degree, while constructing lesbian relationships as immune to the forces of inequality, social or otherwise. In this context, lesbian SM and its representations (including Acker’s) exist in direct opposition to “American feminism’s foundational fantasy of ‘role-less’ equality’ . . . [which] was able, for a while, to keep this myth relatively coherent and contained until women began to challenge it from racial, ethnic, generational, and sexual locations that were in discord with and excluded from the foundation of this image” (Hart 37). Thus, while it is important to identify the queer antisocial politics that underscore Juliette’s SM, we must refrain from attributing an a priori equality to these women and their sexual practices.

What is far more important than the fact that both Juliette and Laure are women, is the fact that Laure’s vocal request for a whipping is a response to Juliette’s speech about society teaching women to hide their cunts; moreover, Juliette’s explanation begins with an observation about Laure’s unruly, sexualized body—“Are you thrusting your

cunt out at me” (Acker, *DQ* 173)? This detail about Laure’s physical movements functions as an embodied expression of female sexual subjectivity and desire that is not rooted in discourse and can be read as a queer disruption of sexual subjectivity’s reliance on patriarchal, binary language.

Acker will again emphasize the details of queer sexual practice and their ability to disrupt hegemonic discourse in the final portion of the Sadean retelling, when Juliette penetrates Laure with a plastic dildo, eliciting a wail from both women. Their instructor, Delbène, then asks Juliette, ““Do women take no responsibility for their own actions and therefore have no speech of their own, no real or meaningful speech?”” To which Juliette replies: ““No,’ I managed to reply. ‘I’m coming.’ Those were my words” (Acker, *DQ* 175). Juliette’s response both negates Delbène’s presumption that women have no real or meaningful speech (of their own) *and* defines the phrase “I’m coming” as her own words. Juliette’s insistence on her wail (of pain and/or pleasure) as signifying language, emphasizes a central tenet of Acker’s project: “the relationship between language and body” (qtd. in “A Conversation with Kathy Acker” 18). Indeed Juliette’s wail can be read as a mode of resistant language-making rooted in the body, which has its corollary in Acker’s various representations of other resistant meaning-making practices, like tattooing, which is “the meeting of body and, well, the spirit—it’s a *real* kind of art, it’s on the skin[,] . . . people who are beginning to take their own sign-making into their own hands” (qtd. in “A Conversation with Kathy Acker” 18). Like the tattoo artist, the pirate, or the sailor who are “conscious of their own sign-making, signifying values really” (qtd. in “A Conversation with Kathy Acker” 18), Juliette utilizes her bodily sensations as a

way of intervening in the process of meaning-making, which, in phallocentric language has been traditionally controlled by men.

Through her own language, Juliette claims the embodied sexual pleasure she already feels. In doing so, Juliette demonstrates how queer sexual pleasures can be used to access embodied knowledge that always already exists, despite its discursive elision (in both patriarchal society and in Acker criticism, for that matter). Moreover, this embodied knowledge reveals women as sentient, agential subjects, while refuting the exclusivity of male-ownership over both discursive and embodied sexual pleasure.⁵¹ In this sense, Acker's project, even more than Burroughs's, finds its counterpart in the work of lesbian SM author-activists who stress the significance of embodied knowledge or "corporeal epistemology." In Khan's analysis of Samois's first publication, *What Color is Your Handkerchief: A Lesbian S/M Sexuality Reader* (1979), she explains how

The articles in the booklet also attempt to rewrite the prevailing feminist script of the body. While anti-s/m and anti-porn discourse often perpetuated the view that the body's urges could not be trusted because of patriarchal indoctrination, *Handkerchief* recuperates the body as a source of knowledge. . . . An argument follows that the body—with its urges, pleasures, and releases—holds a singular insight into the truth of s/m. (94)

The parallels between Acker's and SM lesbians' investment in corporeal epistemology as a mode of refuting feminist (mis)understandings of the body, underscores why queer pleasures and the community-produced discourses about such pleasures are necessary for

⁵¹ This reclamation of discursive and embodied pleasures constitutes a significant reworking of the Sadean gender schema, in which, according to Luce Irigaray, the female must "lose consciousness—and existence?—through the theoretical and practical power of his [the libertine master's] language" (198).

any holistic understanding of the sexual politics in *Don Quixote*. This parallel, along with Acker's insistence that "the body does not lie" ("A Few Notes" 122), makes clear the urgent necessity to read Acker's explicit, queer representations as embodied sexual practices that can and should be related to material experiences.

A review of scholarship on this scene from *Don Quixote* demonstrates previous critics' significant efforts to sanitize Acker's pornographic representations of their eroticism. For instance, Walsh interprets this final sequence of events primarily in metaphoric terms, arguing that

[A]lienation from society is alienation from speech. For woman, this means communication is incompatible with her sexuality. At the end of the Sade episode, when Juliette's attempts at masculine mastery of Laure have ended with both women wailing in pain and fear, language and sexuality come together. . . . Juliette can have no language but the affirmation of sexuality. Whether this language can have meaning depends upon the possibility of its finding or establishing community. (167)

According to Walsh, the possibility of finding or establishing community is never definitively resolved in Acker's text, which simultaneously narrates both possibilities at its conclusion. Walsh's dismissal of Juliette's claim to language through an affirmation of her sexuality problematically reinforces a stable and privileged gender binary that associates men with the higher order mind and women with fleshly temptation. By discounting the subversive power of sexuality and its queer articulations, Walsh disregards Acker's postmodernist commitment to deconstruction, which actively destabilizes the privileged binaries upon which hegemonic signification depends.

Furthermore, Walsh's claim that "the women succeed only in recreating the abuses of male sexual dominance, albeit with painful self-awareness" (161), presumes that the word "wail" can only ever be associated with unwanted pain, which blatantly ignores Acker's investment in the indeterminacy and multiplicity of meaning that inheres in every articulation.⁵² The limitations Walsh identifies in Juliette's response to Delbène overlooks both Juliette's agency and the queerness that inheres within Juliette's response: specifically, Juliette refutes Delbène's accusation that women have no real or meaningful speech of their own by explaining that her wail (and by implication Laure's wail) was in fact real and meaningful speech signifying female pleasure ("I'm coming"). That Delbène, a libertine in the true Sadean tradition,⁵³ and Walsh both found this articulation of female sexual agency and subjectivity incomprehensible should be no surprise. Walsh seems to unconsciously align his interpretation of Juliette and Laure's sexual performance and their wail/speech with the interpretation given by the male-identified Delbène.⁵⁴

In aligning himself with the only male-identified character in this scene, Walsh's critique bespeaks his own inability to comprehend the specificity of "the true state of female human knowledge" (Acker, *DQ* 174), which might best be understood through Khan's term "corporeal epistemology." In Acker's female-centered retelling of Sade, her

⁵² In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Acker explains how "you can talk about any intellectual thought and it will be 'up for grabs' in the sense that anything can mean anything else and hence be completely perverted" (93).

⁵³ According to Irigaray, there are two types of female characters in Sade, the innocent woman in need of education or the "full-fledged female libertines [who] speak and act like phalocrats. . . . *Token women*" who "seduce, suck, screw, strike . . . like the strong men they are" (199).

⁵⁴ In the original Sade, evidence of Delbène's male-identification can be found when she explains to Juliette that 10-yr-old Laurette can be sacrificed on the altar of pleasure because she is owned by them as punishment for running away from the convent.

characters are granted a queer access to corporeal epistemology through the use of non-procreative sexual instruments, such as fingers, rods, dildos, and whips. Juliette herself explains the significance of a specifically queer embodied pleasure when she tells Laure, “I’ll whip you by breaking you down by breaking through your virginity or identity. As soon as you’re no longer a virgin, you’re going to leak. You’ll keep leaking so you won’t be able to retain any more of their teachings” (Acker, *DQ* 173). Laure’s immediate response is to beg Juliette to whip her badly, which, far from indicating the women’s desire or attempt to occupy male sexual roles, reveals instead Laure’s and Juliette’s mutual (and consensual) desire to acquire knowledge through queer pleasures.

Reading Juliette’s and Laure’s wails as signifying language resulting from a corporeal epistemology that is rooted in queer SM reveals how the queerness of Juliette’s language and action is akin to Halberstam’s project, which

explore[s] a feminist politics that issues not from a doing but from an undoing, not from a being or becoming women but from a refusal to be or to become woman as she has been defined and imagined within Western philosophy[.]. . . an anti-Oedipal feminism that is nonetheless not a Deleuzean body without organs. (*The Queer Art of Failure* 124)

Indeed, the very idea that Juliette and Laure’s queer sex will render them unable to retain “any more of their [i.e. male] teachings,” clearly indicates how these women’s exploration of SM enables their refusal to be or become women as defined by Western philosophy. Aligning Juliette’s, and by extension Acker’s, project with Halberstam’s queer feminism, further problematizes scholarship on Acker’s Sadean episode.

In particular, a queer interpretation of this scene undermines David Brande's claim that Acker's Sadean retelling fails to create a Deleuzian body without organs, which he argues makes Juliette's performances fundamentally unsuccessful. Brande explains how "instead of whipping Laure as she first promises, Juliette winds up attempting to recreate heterosexual intercourse and botching the experiment. . . . Instead of whipping Laure (in an attempt to produce the Body without Organs) or using her finger-rod (in an attempt at a feminine nexus of knowledge and pleasure)" Juliette fucks Laure with a dildo (207). This reading is remarkably close to Walsh's interpretation wherein Juliette attempts and fails at masculine mastery (Walsh 167); both Brande and Walsh wrongly and problematically presume that the penetration of a woman with a dildo by another woman is heterosexual mimicry, or at the very least a desire for heterosexual intercourse.

In both Brande's and Walsh's readings, we can see yet another example of the pervasive impact the sex wars has had on literary studies,⁵⁵ namely how "during the recent 'sex wars' dildos have become a site of such heated contestation" (Hart 95). In much the same way that Brande and Walsh refuse to acknowledge the specifically queer pleasures represented in Juliette and Laure's dildo usage, "Heather Findlay points out that critiques of the dildo have been couched in concert with objections to butch/femme and s/m—all three of them ostensibly signifying imitations of heterosexual patriarchy" (Hart 95). Brande's and Walsh's presumptions uncritically reinforce a problematic legacy of the sex wars, during which "the suppression of role playing . . . by lesbian feminists in

⁵⁵ I elaborate on the influence of anti-SM/porn rhetoric on literary studies in Chapter Four's discussion of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*.

the 1970s and 1980s further erased an elaborate and carefully scripted language of desire that butch and femme dykes had produced in response to dominant culture's attempts to wipe them out" (Halberstam, *Masculinity* 121). In *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam explores the queer specificity of roleplaying and dildos amongst lesbians as a way of countering the notion that "butch-femme and its forms of sexual role playing . . . [are] a gross mimicry of heterosexuality" (Halberstam, *Masculinity* 121). Specifically, Halberstam cites the extensive ethnographic evidence collected in Kennedy and Davis's *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, which "stress[es] in particular one difference between butches and men: butches, even though they took the active or aggressive role sexually, aimed solely—unlike men—to please their partner sexually rather than simply to please themselves" (Halberstam, *Masculinity* 125). Indeed, we might turn to any number of academic or practitioner-produced texts for evidence that dildo usage, role-playing, or butch identity all constitute distinct queer practices and not replications of heterosexuality.⁵⁶

Moreover, what Brande fails to account for in the "failure" of Acker's Juliette is the queerness that Halberstam argues inheres in failing. For Halberstam, "masochistic gestures . . . invite us to unthink sex as that alluring narrative of connection and liberation and think it anew as the site of failure and unbecoming conduct" (*Queer Art* 145).⁵⁷ Even more relevant to a queer understanding of Acker is Halberstam's claim that "the

⁵⁶ See Dorothy Allison's "The Theory and Practice of the Strap-On Dildo" in *Skin* (1994) or Lily Burana, Roxxie, and Linnea Due's collection *Dagger: On Butch Women* (1994)—to name only two examples.

⁵⁷ Halberstam's formulation of queerness as a site of failure and unbecoming conduct might even enable a reclamation of both Brande's dismissal of failure as a mode of disrupting the gender binary and of Walsh's pathologization of Juliette and Laure's wail as a failure of speech and a failure (or displeasure/refusal) to embody heterosexual male roles. However, the latter reading seems unnecessary given the presumption underlying my reading of the scene, namely that neither Juliette nor Laure experiences a failure of speech.

antisocial dictates an unbecoming, a cleaving to that which seems to shame or annihilate, and a radical passivity allows for the inhabiting of femininity with a difference” (*Queer Art* 144). Through Halberstam we can see Juliette’s feminine wail and her use of the dildo as challenges to normative notions of femininity as they are constructed within patriarchal society.

By emphasizing the specifics of the embodied sexual acts represented in Acker’s fiction, we can disrupt the prevailing critical consensus, which claims that “[s]ignification itself is therefore a core issue to Acker’s project, and throughout her fiction, she pays close attention to how language works, reveals inflections of power” (Milletti 363). Though critics have been correct in articulating the centrality of an exploration of power to Acker’s work, they have problematically foregrounded abstract signification at the expense of Acker’s explorations of power and violence, which operate primarily on the level of the body (or on the level of embodied experience) and its expression through language. As noted earlier, Acker insists on the inseparability of the body and language. The lack of critical attention to the importance and specificities of embodied sexual practice in Acker allows Milletti to conclude that “Acker, after all, is not a sexual lobbyist” (365). Such conclusions elide the dynamic relation among discourse, embodied pleasure, and sexual practice that is so central to Acker’s representations of SM and to her project more generally.

Not all Acker scholarship is so intent on delinking Acker’s pornographic representations from a progressive sexual politics. Arthur Redding identifies “a continuum between the violent processes of female subjectivity and masochism understood as a sexual practice. More accurately, sexual masochism becomes a way out,

a means of working through constitutive debasement. Atop this personal sexuality, she will build a politics of perversion” (298). However, Redding has observed that masochistic self-destruction is a common characteristic of Acker’s protagonists,⁵⁸ and that “this self-destruction is always bound up with a utopian if somewhat solipsistic desire for radical transformation” (285). Indeed, Redding’s analysis clarifies how Acker’s work, out of all the postmodernist authors discussed in this chapter, most closely aligns with the politics, if not the content, of queer SM pornography. I emphasize the difference in content because at times Acker, unlike the majority of queer SM pornographers, links masochistic pleasure and politics with self-harm,⁵⁹ particularly when she parodically deconstructs psychoanalytic discourse. This type of critical parody can be seen when Acker mocks Freud’s notion of natural female masochism,⁶⁰ while still recognizing the ways in which patriarchal, Western society socializes women through violence and pain to accept submissive and masochistic roles. At times, Acker seems to identify masochism as a convenient construct for patriarchy, while in other moments she aggressively embraces masochism and explores its utopic potential.

In part, such utopic potential is linked to female agency, which can be seen in the ways that Acker’s Sadean retelling transforms the pornographic scenario “into a speech

⁵⁸ The type of masochistic self-destruction found in Acker must be differentiated from SM’s disruptive *jouissance* identified by Bersani, a point that will become central to my reading of SM in Pynchon and my discussion of queer theory’s antirelational/utopia divide in the Conclusion.

⁵⁹ In many ways, Acker’s exploration of self-harm and female masochism anticipates Halberstam’s theorization of queer failure, in particular Halberstam’s reading of Yoko Ono’s performance art and Elfriede Jelinek’s novel *The Piano Teacher*. For Acker, self-harm can be a way of acknowledging and owning one’s pain and it can function as a tool of confrontation, either a way to make visible one’s injury or as a contrastive example that demonstrates contemporary society’s problematic saturation with violence. Acker explains how “a woman who does a cutting on herself and lets herself bleed a little is hardly as unhealthy as a man who beats up his own wife. What so-called ‘normal’ people do is so disgusting” and yet society condones it (qtd. in “Interview with Andrea Juno” 185).

⁶⁰ See Floyd (59).

of [Juliette's] own,' speech indicating active female sexual subjecthood" (Pitchford 29). Pitchford goes on to identify this as a "pleasure-claiming act of speech" that "is a first step towards agency" (29).⁶¹ Indeed, the linking of language, agency, and sexual pleasure is significant from the outset of *Don Quixote*, when the narrator explains to her canine companion that men who have said "that women live only for men's love" have lied (27), while also pointing out that "an alteration of language, rather than of material, usually changes material conditions" (27). This Foucauldian emphasis on the power of discourse to alter material (embodied) conditions is extremely relevant in a text that is so invested in appropriating and reworking classic male-authored texts and pornography. Or as Acker explains: "*Don Quixote*, more than any of my other books is about appropriating male texts and . . . the middle part of *Don Quixote* is very much about trying to find your voice as a woman" (qtd. in "A Conversation with Kathy Acker" 13).

However, *Don Quixote*'s structural emphasis on language and literature should be read as *the mode* through which Acker's larger (and queerer) project operates; that is, the body's capacity for pleasure and pain, its ability to utilize language as a way to access queer embodied experiences, becomes the primary source of (female) agency in Acker. The centrality of the body in Acker—in particular the privileging of embodied experience

⁶¹ However, Pitchford's focus on language—a focus which explores the multiplicity of potential reader-positions attributable to Juliette, St. Simeon, and the extra-diegetic audience—glosses over the importance of the body in this scene. The model of readership Pitchford proposes "counter[s] the conventional image of the pornographic consumer" and it "can and should . . . be generalized to diverse postmodern acts of reading (which means, to all negotiations with the postmodern world)" (32). Tellingly, Pitchford's conclusion deemphasizes the specificity of embodied acts represented in the pornographies of postmodern literature.

as a method for accessing and producing knowledge—is fundamental to the genealogy of queer SM pornographies that are the subject of my subsequent chapters.⁶²

Moreover, as in queer SM pornographies, the pleasures of SM (representations) in Acker often highlight “the theatrical structure of s/m” (Ziv 182),⁶³ creating a (sexual) space that permits other ways of imagining oneself and of imagining sociality. The theatrical space of SM contains the possibility for a unique kind of thinking, engaging, and learning. Though Acker’s emphasis on violence in many of her sex scenes distances it from many practitioner-produced representations of SM, both types of texts (Acker’s and queer SM porn) share an underlying tenet that can be found in embodied queer SM practice as well.⁶⁴ This commonality can best be described as the notion that “one of the most effective ways to fight political power and even render it unnecessary is to understand the impulses to power and submission in oneself and integrate them, rather than trying to extend them in political systems. Involvement in S&M tends to take away a person’s ‘need’ to oppress and be oppressed, manipulate and be manipulated socially and politically” (Young, *LC* 104).

Frequently, embodied knowledge production in Acker starts from an exploration of the workings of power and violence, taking both as a given aspect of the human

⁶² The significance of the body, specifically embodied pleasures, is primary in Acker’s work. Acker even explained that she frequently attempted to write while masturbating and experiencing orgasm in order to transliterate the experience of orgasm into writing and see where/if language would break down (Interview in *Who’s Afraid of Kathy Acker?*, Dir. Barbara Caspar [2008]).

⁶³ Ziv explains the unique space created in SM interactions and how it distinguishes itself from social reality: “the highly stylized and scripted nature of the interaction clearly sets it off from ordinary behavior” (183).

⁶⁴ It is interesting that Redding acknowledges that Acker’s work has been published alongside the work of noted SM advocates Patrick Califia and Dorothy Allison in the anthology *High Risk*. And yet, Redding fails to move beyond this observation and explore the links between Acker’s politics of perversion and the politics found in the textual, cultural, and embodied practices of SM communities.

condition. The dual nature of SM—its simultaneous reliance on the body and on discourse/narrative, a nature I will explore in more detail in subsequent chapters—makes it uniquely suited for this type of knowledge production. Acker uses this playful, experimental SM space to work through violence as an affective state, exploring the intricacies of being a subject of violence in addition to being its agent, creating, enacting, and wrestling with violence in a way reflective of Acker’s belief that one can “play with pain in an S&M context where: you play with things you don’t like because you’re scared of them [W]hen I play with it [pain] I’m just seeing if I can endure it” (qtd. in “Interview with Andrea Juno” 184). The relationship between violence and SM in Acker can be partially illuminated if we think of SM rituals as tools to achieve “a mystic understanding and strength in ourselves. We gain an understanding of violence and the uses of power in the world” (George Strambolian, qtd. in Mains 87).

Since part of SM’s value lies in gaining knowledge about how violence and power operate, it is important to emphasize that

what makes events like rape, kidnapping, slavery and bondage evil in the first place is the fact that they cause harm, limit freedom, terrify, scar, destroy, and coerce. But in SM there is attraction, negotiation, the power to halt the activity, the power to switch roles, and attention to safety. Like a Shakespearean duel on stage, with blunted blades and actors’ training, *violence is simulated, but it is not replicated*. (Hopkins 124)

As in Acker, the relation between SM, violence, and (self-)knowledge is a consistent part of community-produced SM discourse, even while most SM texts emphasize consent and safer sex practices. The distinction between the simulation and replication of violence

should be taken seriously when considering Acker's pornographic representations, or any postmodern representations of sadomasochistic sex for that matter. This distinction can certainly be found in *Don Quixote*—compare, for example, how the opening abortion scene is framed as a scene of sexual violation where Don Quixote's access to consent/language is impeded by the anesthetic, with any number of the SM scenes discussed above that emphasize both pleasure and consent. This clear pattern of delineation can also be found across multiple texts in Acker's oeuvre, where she consistently distinguishes between replications of violence and its simulation in an SM context. As demonstrated above, the simulation/replication distinction is operative in *Naked Lunch* as well, where the simulation of violence in Slashtubitch's film and the replication of violence for the sexual pleasure of the Mugwumps in "Hassan's Rumpus Room" stand in stark contrast to each other. Significantly, William Burroughs's writing served as one of Acker's primary models for experimenting with literary form.

However, a thematic interest in distinguishing SM from replications of violence is not the only overlap between Acker's work and that of practitioner-produced SM texts. Acker's narrative practice of incorporating low genres, like pornography, alongside the plagiarism of canonical literature, creates a collage-like structure that incorporates the essay form as well. This blend of fiction with essay is also characteristic of a significant number of genre-blending texts produced from within queer SM communities, which are the focus of Chapter Three. Indeed, in these practitioner-produced texts it is not unusual to find erotic stories interrupted by lengthy commentaries on sex and gender politics, or, even more commonly, where a theoretical essay on SM or a how-to manual is punctuated

by extended erotic stories—including narrativizations of personal experiences, (apocryphal) anecdotes, and fiction or poetry.

Moreover, as with the queer SM fiction analyzed in Chapter Two, Acker's work serves a dual purpose that includes the production of a type of queer theory. Indeed, her fiction relies heavily on a variety of academic discourses and, more importantly, "Acker creates fictions that are theories-in-performance, speculative fictions that act out the suppositions of both poststructuralism and feminism" (Sciolino 438). This mode of fictions that are "theories-in-performance" calls to mind the speculative fictions of Califia or Queen, whose stories and novels present a narrativization/performance of the theories each author develops in their non-fiction essays. Indeed, it is the theory-producing function of queer SM pornography—which is the focus of my following chapter—that makes this literary genealogy such a valuable object of study.

Despite these temporal, stylistic, and thematic overlaps between Acker's avant-garde prose and the work of practitioner-produced, queer SM texts, critics have been reticent to explore the relation among embodied practices, Acker's representations of sadomasochistic sex, and practitioner-produced SM discourse. For instance, both Acker and queer SM communities were influenced by the work of Yukio Mishima, in particular *Sun and Steel* (trans. 1970), a manifesto on discipline and body-building as art. Larry Townsend characterizes *Sun and Steel* and Mishima's novels as highly descriptive "from the emotional S&M standpoint (though not manifestly sexual)" (*Handbook* 256). These shared reading practices, in conjunction with the contours of a utopic SM politics in Acker, signal some of the ways in which these two temporally coincident discursive

proliferations surrounding SM—postmodern fiction and practitioner-produced SM texts—are linked.

Furthermore, the very idea that one can use writing and embodied experience to explore and work out issues of power is equally significant for Acker and queer SM authors. In her work, Acker is very invested in disrupting the cultural assumption that “writing is cerebral whereas body-building is material. But they work together. . . . It’s only Mishima that’s really talked about it” (qtd. in “Devoured By Myths: Interview” 22). She goes on to explain how “the body’s so rich, who’s controlling it? It’s like text. When you write, are you controlling a text?” (22). Here Acker’s interest in body-building and in Mishima reveals her understanding of writing as an embodied practice, one that is intimately linked to issues of power, control, and sexuality. Clearly Acker’s work is more easily linked with queer SM pornography than that of the other postmodern authors discussed in this chapter. Though the body as a site of truth is a significant aspect of Burroughs’s prose, this theme is far more developed in Acker’s fiction, which must partly be a result of the mimetic tone (at least in comparison to Burroughs) Acker deploys in her pornographic representations. And unlike Coover’s writing, Acker’s pornographies also make queerness an overtly defining feature of her explicit representations. Even still, as my readings of Acker and Burroughs have shown, a focus on the details of specific sexual acts (or in the case of Coover, the ambiguity of these details) reveals the extent to which explicit (somasochistic) representations become intrinsic to the postmodern project.

While the presence of somasochistic content in “high” literature effected huge shifts in the American imaginary—suddenly making explicit representations of queerness

widely available—queer SM pornographers, those “other postmoderns,” lacked the same “high” cultural cachet and broad circulation that was accessible to Acker, Burroughs, and Coover. And yet, both of these temporally and thematically overlapping literary genealogies can be said to reflect and effect a new cultural paradigm—where the absence of obscenity laws and the increased visibility of lesbian and gay communities coincided to make a diverse range of sexual practices widely visible in ways they hadn’t been before. It was during this period that “the slow movement, evident since World War I, toward the inclusion of the erotic in the public sphere, suddenly rushed ahead, as sex became a daily staple of American popular culture” (D’Emilio & Freedman 288).

This visibility, perhaps one might say accessibility to sexual experimentation (either through its representations in various media forms or through embodied experience), suddenly made sexual practice a more widely available site for knowledge-production. Unlike the knowledge produced by sexologists who studied the psyche and physiognomy of the 19th-century homosexual (and others who deviated from norms) in order to determine the “truth” of his morphological type, these other postmoderns locate knowledge production in sex acts themselves. Found across postmodern pornographies of both the high literary and queer SM kind, these corporeal epistemologies of embodied pleasure create various truths that are as diverse and subject to change as the bodies and desires from which they are produced. The implications of such knowledges will be taken up in the following two chapters’ exploration of practitioner-produced SM texts, which were products of the sexual subcultures that were inventing “new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body—through the eroticization of the body[,] . . . [which] is a

kind of creating, a creative enterprise” (Foucault, “Sex, Power” 384) that occurred throughout the postmodern era.

Chapter 2. Productive SM and Violence as Perversion

To anti-SM critics, SM is violence, meaning it is either a violent action in and of itself or it is a replication of real world violence. Given the visibility of leatherfolk within gay and lesbian communities for over fifty years, it is not surprising that queer theorists have attempted to reclaim SM as a subversive queer practice. As mentioned in the Introduction, these queer recuperations of SM do not work to dissociate this practice from violence, but rather abstract SM away from its embodied manifestations so that it functions metaphorically as a queer subversion. With their characterization of SM as an ego-shattering force (Bersani) that disrupts a subject's normative timing (Freeman) and bashes back, makes a mess, and dismantles received notions of subjectivity (Halberstam)—queer theorists have tended to associate SM with the antirelational turn. In doing so, these theorists merely give a new value to what remains, in their analyses, an essentially violent practice, even if only in an abstract sense. These characterizations of SM, along with the sadomasochistic representations found in some postmodern American fiction could easily lead one to conclude that SM is, at root, a violent practice. Yet identifying violence as a central component of SM not only goes against understandings of SM that circulated within queer sexual subcultures, but also ignores how SM functions within texts produced by and for queer SM folk. As Foucault succinctly states, “the idea

that S/M is related to a deep violence, that S/M practice is a way of liberating this violence, this aggression, is stupid” (“Sex, Power” 384).

In this sense, previous anti-SM critiques and queer recuperations of SM both have too narrow a focus. Anti-SM writing produced during the sex wars tends to emphasize the external, focusing on the physical and verbal actions within SM scenes and assuming that the words and actions in such scenes have a stable, singular signification that corresponds with instances of real-world violence and oppression. Such critiques rarely look beyond the scene itself at the community formations around SM, for if they did they might notice that social relations between tops and bottoms are not similar to those “between men and women, blacks and whites, straights and queers” and that “sadists do not systematically oppress masochists” (Rubin, *Coming to Power* 224). Queer theorizations of SM also have too narrow a focus in that they have overly privileged the internal experience of SM, emphasizing affective responses and their relationship to individual subjectivity, ignoring how SM functions in terms of relationality. By relationality I am referring to the rich network of interpersonal dynamics that simultaneously enable and are produced by SM practices, which includes, single sexual contacts between individuals (like when cruising), isolated or repeated group sex events, long-term committed relationships within the context of SM, the social institutions and physical spaces that enable such contacts (like bars, bathhouses, and organizations), formal and informal educational networks and systems of apprenticeships, political organizations, and the broader circulation of information, education, and embodied pleasure that result from practitioner-produced printed materials, including magazines, pamphlets, pornography, and other literatures.

Indeed, both queer theory and anti-SM writing have elided the key components that make both SM practice and the subcultural popularity of queer SM texts possible: queer relationality, erotic communities, and intersubjective relations. In essence, previous theorizations of SM have failed to articulate the productive potential of SM that has been theorized, written about, and enacted within queer SM culture for decades. The relationality that SM necessitates and its potential to produce innovative modes of community have been central to queer leather culture—and the texts produced from within that culture—since its inception in the late 1940s. The representation of eroticized violence and of non-consensual power imbalances seen in a handful of SM texts—like William Carney’s *The Real Thing* and Larry Townsend’s *Leather Ad* novels—should be read as the exception, not the rule. Given the rhetorical invocation of non-consensual slavery and violence by anti-SM writers, it makes sense for many SM authors producing erotica for queer communities to distance their writing and sexual practices as much as possible from actual violence—as does John Preston’s classic novel, *Mr. Benson*.

Originally serialized in *Drummer* magazine between 1979 and 1980, John Preston’s,⁶⁵ *Mr. Benson*, quickly became one of the most popular and influential gay SM novels of its time. Eventually, the ten serialized episodes of *Mr. Benson* were collected and published as a novel by Cleis Press in 1983. *Mr. Benson* fictionalizes the vibrant gay, male leather culture that proliferated after Stonewall and before the rise of AIDS. Preston’s text fueled the imaginations of gay and lesbian leatherfolk alike, and the novel’s titular character became so synonymous with the quest for an idealized leather

⁶⁵ Several of the initial serialized episodes were published pseudonymously under the name “Jack Prescott.”

master, that Preston and a friend began selling T-shirts that read “Looking for Mr. Benson,” which were, in turn, so popular that people began to copy and sell them all over the country (Preston, *My Life* 10). Aside from John Preston’s talent for utilizing literary techniques and aesthetic values within the pornographic genre, which helped make *Mr. Benson* a widely known leather classic, its serialization in *Drummer* contributed to the novel’s influence since *Drummer* was both the first and the most widely read gay, leather magazine of the time. Indeed, *Mr. Benson*’s popularity and intertextual influence on other prolific SM authors, makes it a key text for understanding SM’s generative power and queer world-making potential.

Set in New York City and told primarily from the perspective of the young Jamie, the novel focuses on Jamie’s initiation into SM sexuality under the guiding hand of Aristotle Benson, an archetypal leather master. The narrative also incorporates a mystery subplot, fraught with Orientalist language, in which unsuspecting white bottoms are kidnapped and sold into a slavery ring that caters to wealthy men in the Middle East. Despite the mystery subplot, which reveals itself to be riddled with problematic engagements with race, *Mr. Benson* remains a significant text for the positive-productive understanding of SM that emerges from it. Looking at *Mr. Benson*—a text produced by an active participant in gay leather life for the pleasure of queer SM communities—as opposed to analyzing representations of sadomasochistic scenes that are not rooted in erotic communities, as many queer theorists have previously done,⁶⁶ reveals how SM’s queer potential extends far beyond the merely subversive and enables one to see the

⁶⁶ See Elizabeth Freeman’s analysis of Isaac Julien’s *The Attendant* in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* or Jack Halberstam’s readings of Yoko Ono’s performance art and Elfried Jelnik’s novel *The Piano Teacher* in *The Queer Art of Failure*.

positive and productive potential of SM that has been overlooked by previous scholarship.

The absence of eroticized violence in *Mr. Benson* can partly be accounted for by personal preference—John Preston explains that he’s “not interested in violence; it doesn’t turn me on. I am much more interested in the process of submission . . . than I am in someone being forced to submit. I move the plot away from brutality and toward what are, for me, more subtle and interesting interpersonal dynamics” (*My Life* 257). While Preston’s text does not lack violence, it is significant that violence in Preston does not function erotically and is instead used as a pedagogic tool. On the balance, Preston is far more interested in using pornography to explore the unique intersubjective relations enabled by SM, than he is in eroticizing violence.

The pedagogical aspects of Preston’s pornography and texts like it contribute to the productive and utopic potential found in queer SM texts; yet these didactic undercurrents must be distinguished from the educational trope of classic pornographic literature, which can be traced at least as far back as the eighteenth century, in John Cleland’s *Fanny Hill* and the Marquis de Sade’s *Philosophy in the Bedroom*. Aside from the obvious gendered differences between the educational context found between a father and his daughter in *Philosophy* and those found in *Mr. Benson* or in Califia’s and Queen’s texts, the underlying pedagogical functions of queer SM pornography are unique in terms of the relation to actual embodied practices and experiences. Unlike classic pornographic texts that frequently invoked a pseudo-educational framework as a narrative device that enables the detailed representation of a whole catalogue of sexual acts, the pedagogical aspects of *Mr. Benson* and subsequent queer SM pornographies that Preston

influenced, reflect the educational practices of SM communities, which are “obsessed with safety and [have] an elaborate folk technology of methods to maximize sensation and minimize danger. These techniques are transmitted largely by older or more experienced members to neophytes” (Rubin, *Coming to Power* 205). This transmission of knowledge between older, experienced SM individuals and novices manifests itself in queer SM pornographies through the trope of the initiation model. Within the most common form of the initiation model, an older and more experienced top (in the role of “Master” or “Daddy”) guides the inexperienced bottom (“slave” or “boy”) through a series of trials that test dedication and provide opportunities to prove oneself, which culminate with acceptance within the erotic community.⁶⁷

Mr. Benson and other queer SM pornographies also functioned pedagogically for communities of readers. For Preston, the “purpose of pornography is to produce masturbation. . . . [but] I’ve always felt that erotic fiction does have a role in education. I’ve long believed that it is used as a means of sex instruction by gay men” (*Hot Living* 7). The initiation model, which reflects a central practice of gay, male leather culture, functions extra-diegetically as well, so that the readers are welcomed, along with the characters, into an idealized version of communities that actually existed in the real world; thus, queer SM pornography that emphasizes the social aspects of SM offers an indispensable education to readers who are potential participants in queer SM communities, which improves the possibilities for “queer relational formations in the social” (Muñoz, *Cruising* 28). The symbiotic relationship between education,

⁶⁷ For an analysis of this trope in lesbian pornography see Amalia Ziv’s *Explicit Utopias* in which she explores the influence of gay male sexual culture on lesbians and how the initiation model found in queer, cross-gender lesbian pornography fails “to challenge the traditional equation of subjectivity with manhood” (206).

pornographic text, embodied pleasure, and queer relations found in queer SM pornography, like *Mr. Benson*, reveals how the critical tendency to associate SM with queer negativity and the antisocial thesis is insufficient. This becomes particularly apparent if we consider how previous queer theorizations of SM have utilized psychoanalytic approaches that emphasize SM's ability to disrupt and shatter stable notions of subjectivity; in doing so, such work fails to account for SM's productive and communitarian potential, which dominates the pornographic texts examined here.

Specifically, this chapter articulates the four components underlying SM's queer world-making potential that emerge through the study of practitioner-produced SM erotica: the pursuit of fantasy, erotic education, queer relationality, and community formation. Along with some of Califia's short fiction, like "The Calyx of Isis" and "The Surprise Party" (1988), and Carol Queen's novel *The Leather Daddy and the Femme* (1998), *Mr. Benson* epitomizes how "a whole new art of sexual practice develops which tries to explore all the internal possibilities of sexual conduct. You find emerging in places like San Francisco and New York what might be called laboratories of sexual experimentation" (Foucault, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act" 330). While a chapter could certainly be devoted to the study of each of these texts, I have chosen *Mr. Benson* as my primary object of study given its intertextual influence on subsequent work and the surprising absence of scholarship on *Mr. Benson*, despite its central place in gay leather culture. Guided by Foucault's reading of SM communities as "laboratories of sexual experimentation," this chapter explores the "internal possibilities" of SM primarily by studying *Mr. Benson*, with briefer close-readings of Califia's and Queen's erotica. Although briefer, these latter readings should not be taken as mere supplements in the

name of gender inclusiveness. Rather, I have woven my analyses of Califia and Queen throughout each section as a way to both demonstrate that the four tenets of SM's queer world-making potential extend beyond a single text, and, more importantly, as a way to explore how SM's queer world-making potential morphs in surprising ways as it gets adopted in subsequent historical contexts and adapted to the purposes of lesbian and then queer SM communities. In doing so, my briefer readings of Califia and Queen gesture toward the temporal and gendered differences amongst historical SM communities across the country, which becomes central to my study of archival material and mixed-genre texts in the following chapter.

FANTASIES, REALITIES

Mr. Benson distinguishes itself from earlier SM texts through Preston's emphasis on SM's queer utopian potential, which manifests in new modes of queer relationality that are rooted in "better relations within the social that include better sex and more pleasure" (Muñoz, *Cruising* 30), tendencies that will reappear again and again in subsequent SM pornographic literature. According to Preston,

the real power of the erotic literature that was being developed came from the fact that we, the authors, were participant/observer in the sexual life that was developing. We were going to Mineshaft in New York or The Slot in San Francisco—notorious sex clubs of the time—and we were doing what we were writing about. . . . We were giving form to the ideas and images that were parts of our lives. We were articulating a moment of

freedom and revolution that we were sharing with our readers. (*My Life as a Pornographer* 14)

The productive potential of Preston's SM pornography lies precisely in his use of pornographic fantasy narratives to articulate and perpetuate queer sexual freedom and pleasure through SM—both of which constitute queer world-making practices.

Though Preston revealed that his texts were an expression of his personal sexual fantasies,⁶⁸ the productive potential of fantasy within queer SM erotica extends far beyond the prurient production of orgasm in the reader (or writer): it is an essential element of SM's ability to produce queer relationality and in doing so reveals the significant link between fantasy and reality in both representations of SM and embodied SM communities and experiences. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler explains the "critical promise of fantasy," which challenges "the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise . . . it points elsewhere and when it is embodied, it brings elsewhere home" (qtd. in Rodriguez; *Undoing Gender* 29); in other words, fantasy has the potential to expand the possibilities of reality and when embodied, or actualized, this fantasy has a transformative potential for queer relations.

As Preston explains, he and other SM pornographers "weren't promulgating a political position; on the contrary, we were playing with politics to find out just what was

⁶⁸ See Preston's "How do you do pornography?" in *My Life* where he describes how his personal fantasies and writing became so intertwined that he eventually fantasized "in short-story or novel format. . . I am thinking in plot lines" (256). Preston revealed that when he fantasizes he is also working on his writing, he might imagine the details of his protagonist and the man he'll meet and the kind of sex they'll have, but if "the sex they're going to have isn't going to advance the plot . . . there's no reason to have this fantasy—it's a waste of my time. My mind goes blank and my cock goes limp. I can't get off if this isn't going to work in print" (257).

going on in our minds and our fantasies and, for some of us, our lives” (*My Life* 17).

Queer SM porn—such as Preston’s *Mr. Benson*, Califia’s “The Calyx of Isis,” and Queen’s *Leather Daddy*—move beyond the simple equation of pornography with sexual fantasy and reveal instead the relationship between the sexual fantasies of their characters’ and their texts’ diegetic worlds. These explorations between fantasy and reality might lead characters to personal fulfillment, disappointment, or even an enhanced understanding of queer sexual life, by which I mean characters’ pursuit of their sexual fantasies and the results of their attempts to actualize these fantasies within the diegetic world have similarly varied results as would an individual’s pursuit of a personal sexual fantasy in the extra-diegetic world. For instance, the queer protagonist of Queen’s *Leather Daddy*, Miranda, identifies as a woman, but also enjoys putting on “boy-drag” and cruising leather daddies. Throughout the text Miranda struggles through rejection in pursuit of a gay leatherdaddy, despite the risks of being discovered as “no ordinary boy” (Queen 11). Like the other SM pornographies examined in this chapter, Queen’s text makes the realization of a seemingly impossible fantasy seem plausible, particularly through characters’ discussions of identity, community formation, and politics, which were restored to the 2003 edition.⁶⁹ Similarly, the sexual fantasy that is *Mr. Benson*—and the individual sexual fantasies of its characters—are rooted in corresponding historical realities in a way that classic SM pornography, like that of Pauline Réage or Sade, was not. This relationship between fantasy and reality on both diegetic and extra-diegetic

⁶⁹ These sections were cut from the 1998 edition because Queen’s publisher didn’t think they would “enhance a fuck book” (Queen, “Introduction” 5).

levels is clearest in the specificity of detail seen in Preston's fictionalized representations of the sexual subcultures he participated in.

For example, the morning after their first intense evening of bondage, corporal punishment, fisting, and water sports, Mr. Benson instructs Jamie to leave and to call him back only if he is serious about fully committing to a life as Mr. Benson's slave. Mr. Benson wants something more than "some little 'disco doll' who thinks he might be into SM" (Preston, *MB* 32); he needs to have Jamie's full commitment before he bothers to invest the time and effort into his training. Here, Preston tethers the sexual fantasy of Mr. Benson to real world concerns, social divisions, and overlaps within the gay community.

This incorporation of group-belonging and its manifestation in terms of social practices is reflected in Jamie's fantasies as well. After leaving Mr. Benson's lavish apartment, Jamie runs into Larry "the omnipresent flannel-shirt-Levi's stud in every bar in New York. . . . The light brown mustache completed the image of every clone on Christopher Street" (Preston, *MB* 34), and Jamie realizes that after "a year of cruising him in bars" Larry was finally reciprocating the interest. But when they return to Larry's apartment, Jamie realizes that Larry's masculine appearance and dress do not equate with an interest in SM, and Jamie is faced with a discrepancy between what he had fantasized about Larry and the disappointing reality when Larry outright rejects "that role playing shit. We're both men" (Preston, *MB* 37). No longer aroused, Jamie makes it clear that he is leaving, to which Larry responds: "poor little fairy, doomed to look for a knight on a black charger for the rest of your life. Don't you know there are no real masters in gay life? . . . There are only make-believers" (Preston, *MB* 38). According to Larry, Jamie's sexual desires can never be realized.

Larry's lack of interest in SM is accompanied here by a dismissal of SM as anything more than a game of make-believe, a naïve fantasy that has no corresponding reality. Jamie rejects this assumption saying that he believes "there are some men able enough to give as men and some able enough to take as men. I'm only twenty-five; I'm going to keep trying to give and trying to find someone man enough to take" (Preston, *MB* 38). Jamie's emphasis on masculinity in his response corresponds with Preston's view that "rough male sexuality, including public acts of bondage, flagellation, fist fucking, and cocksucking, give the supplicant a means to show his tribe that he is ready to become a man" (*My Life*, "Theatre" 63). Put simply, Preston's fiction offers a representation of the erotic and social value of tethering fantasy to reality that he theorizes in his essays, since the transference of these sexual fantasies to reality enables one to find a type of pleasure they might not otherwise have access to, while also providing a strong sense of community. By linking sexual fantasy with quotidian experience, *Mr. Benson* offers its readers sexual pleasures that they are able to identify with and seek out, making Preston's novel potentially productive of embodied pleasures and sexual relations, which will be further elaborated on in the subsequent section on education.

Unlike the underlying fetishization of masculinity that inheres in both the social-sexual fantasy of *Mr. Benson* and in its characters' individual fantasy scenarios, the critical promise of fantasy that emerges from lesbian SM pornography offers a queerer vision of SM's potential. Authored by women who would not have had equal access to established leather communities like Preston and other gay, male pornographers did, lesbian SM pornography deploys the relationship between fantasy and reality in the

service of producing robust, gender-diverse SM communities. The clearest example of this development can be found in Califia's "The Calyx of Isis" which produces a mythic, though realistic, community of SM practitioners in San Francisco's SOMA district. In "The Leather Menace" (*Coming to Power* [1981]), Rubin recalls that when she came out as a sadomasochist "there was no public lesbian s/m community to find, so I had to help build one. At least in San Francisco, there is now a visible, accessible avenue for lesbians to find their way into an s/m context" (222). Prior to the formation of such a community, there were very few options for SM-oriented lesbians aside from flyers (which got torn down), personal ads, or just being very open about your interests and hoping a similarly interested woman would find you; Califia recalls "an older dyke talking about cruising gay men's leather bars with her lover in the early sixties, looking for other women who shared their sexual interests" (*Coming to Power* 247). The gendered and temporal difference between Preston's and Califia's experiences of coming out about their SM desires, enabled Califia to further develop the productive potential of fantasy through fiction in a way that Preston's own life never required. Looking beyond the nascent productive potential of fantasy in *Mr. Benson*, we can see how lesbian SM pornography fleshes out fantasy's relationship with and ability to produce embodied reality.

Juana María Rodríguez clarifies the significance of fantasy to marginalized populations within already marginalized queer sexual subcultures. Rodríguez identifies the importance of fantasy to those bodies that might be excluded from the public, anonymous sexual practices touted by Bersani and Muñoz, those bodies not discussed in either theorist's works. Specifically Rodríguez mentions dykes, the disabled, and transmen, explaining how for those who are unwilling to or who cannot access such

sexual possibilities, “fantasy becomes a way to bring the imagined elsewhere of a radical sexual sociality home” (341). Because of the different social realities faced by SM lesbians, pornography became a way to envision and produce a sexual community. This mode of expression reveals how SM, like Muñoz’s understanding of queerness, insists “on the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity. . . . [B]y arguing that queerness is primarily about futurity and hope. That is to say that queerness is always in the horizon” (Muñoz, *Cruising* 11); thus, we might say that lesbian SM porn, like Califia’s and Queen’s, extends the function of fantasy so that it becomes a mode of performing queer futurity. This is distinct from the function of fantasy represented by *Mr. Benson*, which might contribute to or expand already existing queer communities.

Since SM lesbian authors lacked a vibrant sexual subculture like the one Preston fictionalized, this initial absence of a community gave rise to a generic mode generally not found in the literature of gay leathermen of the 1970s: speculative fiction, like Califia’s “The Calyx of Isis” (*Macho Sluts* [1988]), which envisions a thriving female leather community complete with a lesbian bathhouse fully equipped with an SM dungeon. “The Calyx of Isis” reveals how in the face of the vitriolic anti-SM attacks that characterized the sex wars of the 1980s, SM lesbians utilized embodied pleasure and the pleasure of fantasy (accessed both by erotic writers and their readers) to advocate for their innovative vision of queer relations. While the work of Samois, the first female SM activist organization in the country, gained initial success in growing the SM lesbian community nationwide, these communities would never approach the accessibility and robustness of the 1970s gay, male culture that Preston fictionalized. These different historical contexts account for the unique relationship between fantasy and reality that

one finds in lesbian SM pornography. Though both Preston and Califia might have used fiction to increase their own sexual pleasure—Preston admits he “envisioned my pornography as a seduction of my readers” (21)⁷⁰ and Califia views pornography as a seduction of an “audience that would appreciate my work (and let me live out some of my fantasies in the real world)” (qtd. in Chapkis, “Introduction” *Macho Sluts* 37)—Califia also understood the generative power of fantasy and its significance to queer sexual cultures. Speaking of *Macho Sluts*, the collection where “Calyx” was published, Califia writes about “the one thing that I believe makes my fiction unique, the fact that it built the very community that it celebrates” (qtd. in Chapkis, “Intro” *Macho Sluts* 37).

“The Calyx of Isis” narrates how Alex, a dominant, butch woman, arranges an elaborate bondage scene for the pleasure of her submissive bottom, Roxanne. The venue, named the Calyx of Isis, is a female run “women’s bathhouse” (Califia, “Calyx” 137), a sexual utopia that includes saunas, bars, dance floors, rooms to rent, and a fully equipped dungeon. It is located in “one of the big, red-brick warehouses on Folsom Street” (Califia, “Calyx” 137), a San Francisco neighborhood best known for gay leatherclubs and bathhouses. By imagining the possibility of an alternate and more cohesive leather community that is not divided by gender or orientation, Califia’s story offers a utopic understanding of queerness as futurity: the narrator reveals how “some leathermen, amused and fascinated with the depth and intricacy of their own perversity, tolerated this intrusion. . . . Others were offended. . . . And a few happy clones dropped their lesbian roommates off at the Calyx before proceeding to Ringold Alley” (Califia, “Calyx” 137-

⁷⁰ Preston recalls several sexual liaisons where his partner for the night complained that Mr. Benson wouldn’t do it that way, and he even heard about men pretending to be the author of *Mr. Benson* in order to get laid (*My Life* 11). Preston relates another anecdote about a man in Los Angeles who told potential partners that he was “the person on whom I had based Mr. Benson” (*My Life* 12).

8). It is significant that Califia's "The Calyx of Isis" is not set in some unidentifiable temporality or location, but rather in a San Francisco contemporary to the story's publication, with specific emphasis on noted landmarks in SOMA, including Folsom Street and Ringold Alley, both of which are known for gay male leather culture (bars, stores, etc.) and cruising.⁷¹ Furthermore, with Califia's references to lesbian and gay roommates, to trans communities, and to some mixed gender spaces, this story articulates the potentiality of a queerer leather community that, given the lack of public lesbian SM spaces, never truly existed.⁷² In Muñoz's terms, one could say that this story engages in a utopian performativity, a *doing* of utopia in the present (*Cruising* 26). By bringing the culture of pre-AIDS gay leathermen into the present of his story-world, Califia combines the no-longer-conscious gay leather past with a not yet existent queer SM future.

Califia's story clarifies the underlying role of fantasy in SM's positive and productive potential, a story that moves the significance of fantasy beyond the prurient pleasures of writing down or reading a sexual fantasy in pornography. In part, I am conceiving of "fantasy" in temporal terms—its present absence and potential future manifestation akin to Muñoz's theorization of "daydreaming," which "represents a

⁷¹ The historical references to the San Francisco leather community might tempt a reading through Freeman's erotohistoriography. However, Freeman's theories—which define SM exclusively as a means of encountering traumatic pasts, like chattel slavery or the Holocaust—fall short when looking at Califia's story, in which the SM practice consistently lacks any historical references. By incorporating elements of San Francisco's recent history, Califia makes the story's unrealized queer future seem more realistic.

⁷² Which is not to say that during this time period there was total separation between the two communities, indeed Rubin's contribution to *Leatherfolk*, "Temple of the Butthole," details the presence of lesbians (and heterosexuals) in the subterranean fisting club, The Catacombs, which was located in San Francisco's Mission District. In a 1998 interview with Amber Hollibaugh, "Another Place to Breathe," Rubin identifies the significant and unacknowledged overlaps between gay male fisting and lesbian sexual practices, specifically the fact that the eroticism and pleasure of fisting is not oriented around male erections, but rather coincides with a lesbian erotics oriented around holes, orifices, and other body parts (*Dangerous Desires* 155).

reactivation of the erotic imaginary that is not limited to sexual fantasies, though it includes them, but is more nearly about a fuller capacity for love and relationality” (*Cruising* 144). The liberated space of the Calyx enables these characters to construct their own social-sexual hierarchies that are not re-presentations of social reality, but rather are the actualization of individual sexual fantasies. According to Amalia Ziv, the performance of SM scenes can be understood “as an intertextual practice that draws on cultural topoi” and not “a direct representation of social experience” (182). SM’s reliance on performative identity—where every scene requires the participant to perform their chosen role through embodied acts, speech acts, and self-presentation—allows for the endless mutability of hierarchies and a range of SM styles. Even within the scene, performative identities and sexual roles can change, as demonstrated by EZ who begins as a masculine dominant and ends up at her partner’s feet, “naked except for a collar and a terry-cloth bathrobe” (Califia, “Calyx” 230).

In the story’s utopic vision, Califia employs what Muñoz would term a utopian hermeneutic by using a vision of queer futurity, made manifest in the pornographic fantasy that is “The Calyx of Isis,” as a way of critiquing—through implied comparison with the present—current and past queer communities’ intolerance toward sexual minorities, where “minority” signifies a range of intersectional identity categories. In this analysis, “present” primarily indicates the time of the story’s publication; however, Califia’s critique remains applicable today, hence the work’s current queer utopic value. Califia’s critique takes four main trajectories: 1) the stigmatization and exclusion of SM practitioners by the lesbian and feminist communities; 2) the marginalization of ethnic, racial, and sexual minorities within the leather scene; 3) the disjunction between the gay

leather community and their marginalized female counterparts; and 4) the resultant lack of a space—both materially and socially—for female SM practitioners. In part, what makes Califia’s fiction unique is his willingness to explore and acknowledge the complexity of SM relations, communities, and identity formation, without shying away from racial and class diversity or gender variance. However, it’s worth noting that despite the diverse racial and national origins of the characters in “The Calyx of Isis,” Califia refrains from explicitly thematizing race.⁷³

As a whole, Califia’s “Calyx” represents a utopic fantasy of a future queer community, but within the narrative itself Alex has an erotic fantasy to “surprise [Roxanne] and give her something that is a fantasy for a lot of bottoms” (152)—an individual sexual fantasy that necessitates the formation of a not-yet-real community of queer women,⁷⁴ women who are painstakingly gathered and selected for their range of SM skills and interests by Tyre, the Calyx’s owner. Unlike other sexual practices, SM scenes take significant forethought: fantasizing, planning, and then working to secure their reality. On a micro-level, the pursuit of individual sexual fantasies is necessary for embodied SM practice since the materialization of an SM scene requires that one flesh out the fantasy by imagining, in detail, the participants, instruments, and roles in advance of the individual fantasy’s actualization—this process could occur spontaneously in a bar

⁷³ It wasn’t until the publication of *Melting Point* (1993), that Califia would more overtly engage with racial and class differences in the lesbian community and more specifically in terms of SM erotics. Published in *Melting Point*, “Big Girls,” opens in a popular, San Francisco lesbian dive bar. Califia describes the various groups of patrons in terms of gender presentation, sexual proclivities, dress, class, and race, before explaining the specific sexual-social dynamics within and amongst various groups. Later, race becomes more overtly thematized when Chambray—a friend and occasional lover of the protagonist, Kat—tells Kat that her current partner “says I should quit letting white girls like you treat me like a piece of meat” (Califia, *Melting Point* 31). In response, “Kat almost hit the table. But for once her life, she had the sense to keep her temper. This was delicate stuff. The two of them had never talked about color. They pretended that being friends had somehow settled all that” (Califia, *Melting* 31).

⁷⁴ The narrator notes that Roxanne’s group sex fantasy is common for bottoms in the SM community.

in a single evening, but it wouldn't be uncommon for the process to be extended over several days or even weeks, as it is in "Calyx." According to Califia "the key word to understanding S/M is fantasy. The roles, dialogues, fetish costumes, and sexual activity are part of a drama or ritual" (qtd. in Ziv 182). Thus, individual sexual fantasy is the underlying component and motivating factor of embodied SM practice; moreover, the realization of such individual sexual fantasies relies on a broader, future-oriented fantasy of the social-sexual world, namely, a utopic vision of queer world-building wherein one has access to the physical space, social space, and an educated community of like-minded individuals—all of which are necessary to fulfill individual sexual fantasies.

It is significant that SM necessitates an engagement with and pursuit of fantasy—in the service of queer futurity, what Muñoz has called the "not-yet-realized"—that is not required by other sexual practices. Indeed, the pornographic fantasy of "The Calyx" is not limited to its sexual scenes; that the fantasy of the story includes significant reimagination of queer social worlds is what enables it to function as a utopian hermeneutic in which the story's social-sexual fantasy becomes the vehicle for a doing of Muñoz's queer futurity.

The slippage between my uses of the term "fantasy" can be clarified by the distinction between "individual sexual fantasies" and my use of the more capacious term "social-sexual fantasy," the latter indicating the performance of queer utopia in pornography (i.e. the pornographic fantasy's relation to embodied communities of practitioners). "Social-sexual fantasy" also includes the intersubjective relations produced by the activism, organizing, and education that emerged from queer leather communities, like those discussed in my Introduction. Individual sexual fantasies are a distinct

component of social-sexual fantasies, but the two concepts are not coterminous. Pursuing individual sexual fantasies contributes to the realization of queer futurity, since the pursuit of individual sexual fantasies can function as a catalyst for the realization of social-sexual fantasies, in much the same way that Muñoz explains “daydreaming” as “doing the work of imagining another life, another time, another place—a version of heaven on earth that is not simply denial or distraction but a communicative and collective mode of transport that helps one think of another place where our Eros is not conscripted in the fashion that civilization demands” (*Cruising* 144). The distinction between individual sexual fantasy and social-sexual fantasy relies on the fundamental notion that fantasy scenarios enacted within the SM scene are not in any way indicative of desires for specific social roles.

The distinction between these two uses of the term “fantasy” is clarified by Lynda Hart’s theorization of performativity in which “lesbian sadomasochistic sexual practices, as described and defined by practitioners, consummately enact [Herbert] Blau’s first, and most important, ‘universal’ of performance—the consciousness of performance. . . . Although all ‘acts’ are performances, in a performative act the participants must be aware of themselves as actors in the very moment that they are performing” (Hart 151). Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that the content of the individual sexual fantasies are not equatable with the content of the social-sexual fantasy, the latter being a fantasy for a better, queerer social world in which the consensual realization of individual sexual fantasies is possible—more simply, “social-sexual fantasy” is a fantasy for a queerer future in which social conditions allow for the actualization of individual fantasy

scenarios.⁷⁵ The materialization of SM social-sexual fantasies is facilitated by the educational potential that inheres in practitioner-produced SM texts, which instruct readers in safer sex practices, while enabling readers to learn more about their own desires. While the educational potential is most apparent in the mixed-genre texts that are the subject of my following chapter, there are significant educational components in pornographic material as well.

SM: AN EDUCATION

In part, erotica's educational potential and its relation to queer world-making results from its broad (subcultural) circulation, or what Michael Warner has called the publicness of pornography. As Warner observes, pornography is significant for nonnormative sex practices because of its "potentially creative effect" which enables "unpredicted forms of experience" that are "especially important for young queers or for those who do not live in a gay neighborhood" (*The Trouble with Normal* 185). Though Warner is discussing visual pornography, his comments—particularly the idea that pornography produces acknowledgement of identities that might not already be "organized and recognized as legitimate" (185)—are equally relevant to pornographic fiction; as Preston observed close to twenty years before Warner, "the message of gay pornography is the affirmation of the male's love for other men" (*My Life* 193). Like Warner, Preston recognizes that pornography allows individuals to decrease their sense of isolation by realizing that they are not unique in their queer desires. Indeed, Preston was a

⁷⁵ Not a world in which individual sexual fantasies are coextensive with power dynamics and social hierarchies in reality.

serious advocate for the pleasurable and pedagogical functions of pornography, recognizing that because pornography is the most accessible and widely read genre within the gay community it is an especially effective mode of sex education—this observation is particularly true of *Mr. Benson* given its popularity and its influence on subsequent erotica that further developed pornography’s educational potential.

For instance, in Queen’s *The Leather Daddy and the Femme*, Miranda has a well-worn copy of *Mr. Benson* that her gay, leather daddy, Jack, finds one day. Jack explains how “this character was everybody’s role model—or dream daddy,” to which Miranda responds, “well, that historical moment may be over for you, but the dykes have gotten hold of him now” (39). Here, Queen’s character suggests the degree to which *Mr. Benson* inspired individual sexual fantasies by modeling alternate modes of social-sexual practice. Thus, *Mr. Benson* fulfills Preston’s wish for readers to use pornography as a form of (self-)knowledge production; specifically, pornography allows a reader to “learn about himself and his personal options by reading about others’ experiences” (Preston, *My Life* 193). As Miranda points out, reading *Mr. Benson* would have made individual experimentation possible from the privacy of one’s own home prior to investing in SM accoutrements or risking coming out about one’s SM desires and attempting to find someone to practice with. Furthermore, Preston’s juxtaposition of safe and unsafe SM in *Mr. Benson* helped to create an informed readership, which, in turn, could translate into a more informed community of SM practitioners. In this sense, *Mr. Benson* constitutes a social-sexual fantasy that is productive of queer futurity, which Muñoz explains “is all about desire, desire for both larger semiabstractions such as a better world or freedom but

also, more immediately, better relations within the social that include better sex and more pleasure” (*Cruising* 30).

Though on the surface Preston’s novel *Mr. Benson* does not seem overtly invested in safe-sex education, his writing reveals an awareness of safe sex practice. As *Mr. Benson* progresses, theorizations of SM practice and its significance emerge through juxtaposition with improper, dangerous, or abusive forms of SM, revealing Preston’s awareness of the dangers inherent to the gay leather scene even before the AIDS epidemic. Preston has insisted that he had no serious intentions when writing *Mr. Benson*, despite the seriousness with which some people took it (*My Life* 33); however, the text does function pedagogically—in terms both of Jamie’s indoctrination into the pleasures of SM and of the dangers of cruising in the New York leather scene. Interestingly Preston expressed disdain for those prescriptive SM practitioners and their de-sexualized workshops—“the endless patter of silly bottoms talking about ‘the right way’ to do things. Forgetting the experience, the how-to S/Mer falls back on the rule book” (*My Life* 131); and yet, his fiction does emphasize the dangers of poorly practiced SM.

For instance, mid-way through the novel when Mr. Benson asks Jamie to leave for a long weekend without explanation, Jamie misunderstands and believes someone has replaced him as Mr. Benson’s slave. In a drunken evening of desperation, Jamie goes cruising in search of distraction, which he finds in an anonymous man who leads a leashed Jamie to an apartment. Jamie begins to question his decision—“the size of the man . . . the lack of any agreement before I followed him here, they all combined to make me wonder if I was doing something very, very wrong” (Preston, *MB* 115); his instincts are correct. After blinding him with a hood, binding his testicles, and hanging him in

suspended bondage, the anonymous man proceeds to whip, belt, crop, and cane Jamie's entire body for hours; eventually Jamie loses consciousness and the man rapes him.

When he wakes up on the street, Jamie realizes how "this other man—the one without a name—had taken from me savagely. . . ."⁷⁶ I thought about SM that night. The very idea that there could be rape in an SM context was shocking somehow. But it was obvious that there could be" (Preston, *MB* 124). Jamie's realization draws a sharp line between acceptable and unacceptable SM practices, and in doing so gestures toward a theory of safe SM delineated through contrast.

The potential for readers to learn both about the nuances of their own desires and about sexual safety through SM erotica like *Mr. Benson* is slightly complicated by Preston's critique of leather organizations in the late 1980s and early 90s cited above. Specifically, Preston appears to construct a binary opposition between SM eroticism and SM education, writing that the borderline world of SM—full of excitement, fear, and in-your-face rebellion—has vanished, become codified, and that "the magic of trusting one person, a mentor, and of letting those one-on-one bondings spread out until a brotherhood was formed has been replaced with impersonal how-to manuals" (*My Life* 129). The fact that Preston mounts this critique amidst the AIDS epidemic is a significant context that

⁷⁶ Given the racial dynamics in the mystery subplot (discussed later) and the way in which non-consensual violence is displaced onto racialized, foreign Others, it's worth noting that this anonymous sadist is initially described as having "a slight accent. Italian? . . . Deep black eyes, thick black hair, a rough shaved head and a heavy moustache flowing down over his upper lip. The sleeves of his red flannel shirt were rolled up over hair-covered forearms, heavy with muscle" (Preston, *MB* 111). It is interesting that a scene that begins with consent and then turns into a violent rape occurs at the hands of a "white ethnic," a man who once would have been considered non-white, like other Southern and Eastern European immigrants, but by the late 1970s has been assimilated and granted the privileges of whiteness. Though there are African-American and Italian-American men in Mr. Benson's group of Topmen, there is a distinguishing factor in this context that gives this man—who will ultimately rape Jamie—the air of an ethnic Other that is lacking in the Topmen group: his "slight accent." Indeed, the one member of the Topmen who ultimately betrays the others and facilitates the sale of trusting bottoms into a white slavery ring is also portrayed as a foreigner.

cannot be overlooked. The codification of SM communities coincided with appeals to respectability that Preston found distasteful. Recalling the increased stigma that wrongfully attached itself to SM during the AIDS epidemic and the loss of public SM space when many leather bars and bathhouses were shut down in 1984 and '85, partly clarifies why SM practitioners would gravitate towards more formal organizations that offered an air of legitimacy and a relational context for cruising that slightly mitigated the loss of social institutions. Regardless of such justifications, Preston lamented the formalization of leather culture and its appeals to respectability. This was no doubt an expression of Preston's own nostalgia and feelings of loss for the anarchic freedom he was able to experience in the late 60s and 70s. However, Preston's nostalgia for the more anarchic leather scene of the early 1970s should not be confused with its uncritical idealization, as Preston's inclusion of the rape scene suggests.

While it is certainly true that SM in Preston becomes a means of pursuing "better relations within the social that include better sex and more pleasure" thus aligning SM with Muñoz's utopian hermeneutic (*Cruising* 30), Preston's social-sexual fantasy is limited by its masculinist overtones, namely how Preston identifies SM as a way to explore "the most profound elements of ourselves . . . in contradiction to our prescribed roles in society," SM allows men to encounter "the force of their sexual imagery, rather than trying to analyze it," and SM provides a space where men who have been stigmatized as "frail queers" can instead "confront themselves as strong and resilient" (*My Life* 128). In contrast to Preston's valuing of SM as mode for realizing idealized

forms of masculinity⁷⁷—which, as my discussion of safer sex practices in Preston indicates above, did not solely define SM’s value in Preston—the pedagogical potential found in Califia’s texts differs significantly. Califia’s work is more overt in its eroticization of safer sex practices, which makes sense since Califia’s fiction appears in 1988, close to ten years after *Mr. Benson* and well into the AIDS epidemic. Moreover, the cross-gendered queer encounters found in some of Califia’s fiction both acknowledge and take issue with leather culture’s fetishization of hypermasculinity, even while enabling readers to explore their desires without risk as Preston’s work did.

For example, Califia’s “The Surprise Party,” also published in *Macho Sluts*, illustrates SM’s potential to facilitate cross-gender sexual contact in a way that more genitally-oriented sex might not be able to; this is particularly significant since such work allows readers to imagine pleasures (and to some degree experience their embodied effects) that they might not feel comfortable pursuing in person. At the same time, the protagonist’s internal conflict allows readers to question the valuing of masculinity in SM culture and its relation to real world power imbalances. “A Surprise Party” focuses on the experiences of a butch SM lesbian who appears to have been abducted by three male

⁷⁷ Preston’s valorization of masculinity seems in part to be a reactionary claim in response to the gains of the feminist movement. However, reading Preston’s “Goodbye to Sally Gearhart” clarifies how Preston’s critique of feminism is primarily focused on the anti-SM (and by extension its anti-gay male) rhetoric during the sex wars. He is especially critical of the problematic alliances that anti-porn feminists made with conservative communities that resulted in what he identifies as a focused attack on gay male interests, from both liberal and conservative sides. Preston problematizes feminists’ claim that gay men are significantly more privileged than women, while emphasizing how women’s groups have far more sway in the media and with conservative communities, enabling them to leverage broad community support and attack gay male interests, like adult stores or pornography, which are central to gay social and sexual life (*My Life* 181). Indeed, Warner and Berlant offer a concise explanation of the importance of sex publics, like the adult bookstore, which are important lifelines for gay men across the nation, offering them a line of communication with the larger gay community (because such stores stock publications like the *Advocate*), but also because such locations serve as sites of contact, perhaps the only sites of contact and sexual assignation for closeted gay men (“Sex in Public” 187).

police officers; the uniformed men proceed to physically and sexually dominate and humiliate her. From the outset, the unnamed protagonist struggles between her sexual arousal in a context with men and her self-definition and “public persona” as a lesbian (Califia, “Surprise” 286), while also admitting that “leathermen were sexy enough—dark knights and princes she loved to look at, even if women weren’t supposed to touch. By comparison, cops were kings—fuck, emperors. In the hierarchy of sex objects, she guessed gay cops ranked next to God” (“Surprise” 291). It is not until the story’s end that Califia retroactively negates the violent context by revealing that the cops are actually three gay men (one of whom is a friend of the unnamed protagonist) and we learn that the whole scenario was orchestrated as a birthday surprise by the protagonist’s lesbian partner. As Amalia Ziv points out, the protagonist’s abduction and the subsequent mutual pleasure shared between her and the three “officers” constitutes a reenactment of police violence in an SM context. For Ziv, this framework “functions as a mutual act of exorcism,” since “police harassment belongs to the realm of shared gay experience, common to both gay men and lesbians[,] . . . reenacting the scenario of humiliation and abuse—and eroticizing it—works to co-opt male heterosexual power as a fetish for queer (male and female) sexual pleasure” (200). At the same time, Califia’s story forces readers to consider the implications of such pleasures in real world terms, particularly as they relate to gendered power imbalances within patriarchal culture. Ziv explains that “while the homophobia of the ‘cops’ is obviously fake, their misogynist treatment of the protagonist is in keeping with their actual gender positioning and could signify a gay man’s identification with straight men under a gender-separatist topos” (200). In this sense, Califia’s fiction can be said to mobilize pornography’s educational potential in the

service of questioning (if not outright critiquing) leather culture's idealization of hypermasculinity, like that found in Preston's seminal work.

Aside from implicit self-knowledge production effected by this fraught SM scenario, other moments in "The Surprise Party" reveal pornography's educational potential in more explicit ways. For instance, we find echoes of AIDS-specific safer sex lingo when Mike, sheathing himself in a condom, is described as taking "the pause that protects" (Califia, "Surprise" 306). Here Califia frames safer sex practices as erotic practices, instead of making them mere prerequisites for erotic exploration. The suggestion for Mike to wear a condom is not framed as a desire for STI protection, but rather a command from his Master, Don, who "said, 'We better slow you down, mister,' and shoved a skin into [Mike's] hand" (306). Here safer sex practices are not only incorporated into the erotic scene, becoming one amongst many things Don orders Mike to do, but they are also framed as extending (and thus enhancing the pleasure of) the sex itself.

In other stories, Califia incorporates SM-specific safer sex knowledge into the erotic scene. Take, for instance, the appearance of the term "safe word" in "The Calyx of Isis": Alex explains to Tyre, the bathhouse owner and orchestrator of the group sex scene, how the safe word will enable everyone to determine Roxanne's consent throughout the evening. In "Calyx" we also see Califia pay close attention to safety when characters model and discuss best hygiene practices for sex toys: after Michael penetrates Roxanne with a strap-on, "Kay gave EZ a towel and sent her over to clean off Michael and put her equipment away" ("Calyx" 179), a detail that many erotic writers would choose to gloss over. Safe SM-specific practices also play a large role in the group sex scene: when one

of the tops, Kay, notices that Roxanne's feet have grown cold while she is bound to a cross, "Joy moved behind the cross and loosened the secondary ropes that kept Roxanne cinched extra-tight to it" ("Calyx" 209). For Califia, safety also includes an emphasis on emotional and psychological well-being. Califia repeatedly uses internal focalization when enumerating Roxanne's mental states and levels of consent, writing that Roxanne "did a brief examination of her consciousness and found no resentment in her heart for the way these women passed her around" ("Calyx" 201-2). Such details are accompanied by direct dialogue between Alex and Roxanne who continually articulate their mutual consent, their commitment to each other, and their offering of emotional support. In comparison with Preston, Califia's work—written after the development of formalized SM organizations that largely codified safer sex practices—is more explicit in its educational aspects. Furthermore, the content of Califia's stories, like "The Surprise Party," encourages readers to expand the personal possibilities of their own pleasure and challenges them to remain critical of such pleasures, so that readers are given permission to take pleasure in fraught desires and still question the implications of them.

QUEER WORLD-MAKING: NIPPLE RINGS AND COMMITMENT

Preston characterizes the underlying theme of his own pornography as personal liberation through sexual liberation and safety, which he likens to the voice of Phil Andros in Samuel Steward's work, a voice that marks the "boundaries and limits of trust, realistic expectation, and danger in gay life" (*My Life* 193). It is precisely in this affirmation of intimacy and trust that one can find alternate forms of queer relations rooted in the erotic pleasures of SM. Significantly, these alternate modes of relationality

resist both Bersani's characterization of SM as an ego-shattering force and Freeman's reading of SM as a cathartic coping mechanism for dealing with historical trauma. While some SM texts, and many queer theorizations of SM, find redemptive value in SM's ability to function cathartically, as a way of exorcising past trauma,⁷⁸ Preston resists this trend, which inadvertently reinforces SM's stigmatization by linking the desire for SM to personal trauma and/or mental health issues. Instead, Preston foregrounds how SM is uniquely suited to the creation of intimacy in a way that vanilla sex is not; Preston explains how the necessity of sharing personal erotic fantasies and secrets creates "a powerful linkage between people who perform the acts" (*My Life* 132).

Despite Preston's assertion that SM is unique in its ability to create almost immediate intimacy, it is important that we resist conflating love with intimacy. In later years, Preston explained how love and romance have too frequently become "controlling devices," arguing that "those things shouldn't be necessary" since SM in and of itself "has its own aesthetics and is its own justification" (*My Life* 132), a justification that results in "inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body—through the eroticization of the body. . . . These practices are insisting that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations, and so on" (Foucault, "Sex, Power" 384). In part, *Mr. Benson* spends significant time exploring SM's unique aesthetics and justifications, narrating a social-sexual fantasy that invents new possibilities of pleasure and intersubjective relations. Preston goes on to contrast SM's unique potential for intense and immediate intimacy with the experiences of those who "wander the landscape of bar tricking, never seeming

⁷⁸ See Geoff Mains, Elizabeth Freeman, and Ummni Khan.

to connect with others, they find that even a bit of sadomasochism produces a rapport more powerful than they have found elsewhere” (*My Life* 133).

In his fiction too, Preston emphasizes the unique capacity for SM to create intimacy. In the Epilogue, Mr. Benson ventriloquizes Preston’s own understanding of SM’s values.⁷⁹ Mr. Benson articulates the underlying value of SM relationships as a “delicate submission” based on mutuality and embodied pleasure (Preston, *MB* 214). Throughout these last pages, Mr. Benson foregrounds the role of pleasure in SM practice: “Beating ass is one of the great pleasures in my life. . . . I love the sight of a male body on its hands and knees on the floor in front of me. I love the feel of the skin. . . . I love the way a bottom’s ass quivers when he knows he’s going to get the belt. And I love giving it to him” (Preston, *MB* 210). Mr. Benson’s pleasure depends not only on physical acts, but also on visual and tactile sensation, stimuli that refigure embodied eroticism by deemphasizing genital stimulation, what Foucault called “the desexualization of pleasure” (“Sex, Power” 384). Initially, “Jamie had these warped ideas about being intimate. . . . Like most other guys, it was easier to get Jamie used to taking the belt than it was getting him to a place where he’d be willing to put his arms around me and lay his head on my shoulder” (Preston, *MB* 214). Mr. Benson goes on to explain how he used SM, specifically tit torture, as a catalyst that enabled Jamie to desire intimacy and get “used to being close to a man” (Preston, *MB* 215). This passage reveals how SM practice facilitates a level of intimacy and emotional vulnerability between men that resists gender

⁷⁹ The parallel between Mr. Benson’s thoughts and Preston’s understanding of SM becomes clear when comparing *Mr. Benson* with Preston’s non-fiction essays, like “What Happened?”, in which he discusses his personal erotic preferences and offers a theory on why SM is valuable for the gay community.

expectations within patriarchal culture.⁸⁰ For Mr. Benson, “the cumulative effect of SM” results from a slow process that builds mutual respect between a top and a bottom; “every trip became another part of that emotional bond between us. . . . It was the constant willingness of his part to work at being worthy of me that created the ever-increasing respect I had for him” (Preston, *MB* 215). Above all else, “the magic of SM” is rooted in mutual trust: “[Jamie] decided to trust me to change him. More than that, once he trusted me, I knew I had a set of obligations to be the man he needed” (Preston, *MB* 219), an emotional bond that is solidified when Mr. Benson pierces Jamie’s nipples with diamond tipped bars.

The romantic resolution to *Mr. Benson*, when Jamie’s nipples are marked with diamond studded barbells not only signifies a commitment between the two men and Jamie’s initiation into a leather brotherhood, but it also appropriates and refigures the heteronormative institution of marriage, by acknowledging the importance of publicly celebrating one’s love but without the need for intervention or witness by the state apparatus. Furthermore, as a sign of Jamie’s submission to Mr. Benson and a source of queer, degenitalized erotic pleasure, the nipple rings underscore the importance of sexual pleasure to their mutual commitment. That the nipple rings mark sexual pleasure as *the* defining aspect of their mutual commitment presents a stark contrast to the signifying function of a wedding band in hetero/homonormative marriages, where the rings bear no direct or immediate relation to pleasure and often function instead as markers of sexual unavailability, removing the wearer from circulation within libidinal economies by

⁸⁰ The refiguration of patriarchal gender roles through SM and other gay, male sexual practices—like barebacking—has been noted by Foucault, Bersani, and several other scholars who have discussed how such practices “actually helped to alleviate” the problem “that most gays feel the passive role is in some way demeaning” (Foucault, “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act” 332).

identifying the wearer as the sexual property of his or her mate. Finally, the fact that the ringing ceremony occurs in the privacy of Mr. Benson's home, but with multiple witnesses from their community (whose presence reinforces the ritual's similarity to marriage), collapses the public-private divide by bringing what should be private—according to hegemonic logic—into a sexual and social community, reinforcing the bond between them while signifying their membership in this subculture. In turn, this ritual functions on the sexual, emotional, and social levels, demonstrating one way in which the leather community participates in a process of queer world-making.

The text itself attributes the creation of this ritual to Mr. Benson who explains to Jamie that “there's no ritual for a master and a slave that we alone know about. I mean, no way to tie the bond that a straight couple might have in marriage. But I've decided to create one just for you” (Preston, *MB* 205). While I am not suggesting that Preston created this ritual, it is the first instance where I have found the nipple piercing ritual in popular SM fiction and its influence can certainly be seen in later erotica that is equally invested in SM's potential for producing new modes of queer relationality within the social. Indeed, by resituating the piercing ceremony in different SM subcultural contexts it gets repurposed so that the ceremony also comes to signify lesbian-specific or, more broadly, queer SM relationality.

For example, the hedonistic excess of the group scene in “Calyx” culminates in a piercing ceremony that affirm Roxanne and Alex's relationship and their mutual commitment. Roxanne's ear, nipple, and genital rings signify both her commitment to Alex and to SM's liberatory potential. When Tyre pierces Roxanne she tells her, “in the outside world, you are a particularly despised breed of female: a cunt who rejects cock, a

slave who rejects the masters of currency and armies. But we prize you for what the world despises” (Califia, “Calyx” 236). Here, Tyre overtly refigures heteronormative values by privileging Roxanne’s marked body, a body that signifies her belonging in an erotic, queer community. While some of the content of Califia’s ritual piercing scene is lesbian-specific, it also more generally suggests SM’s productive potential to create interpersonal and community intimacies that, like the scene in Preston, center on subcultural erotic practices.

Though Lynda Hart analyzes this scene and its queering of the marriage bond in *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadomasochism* (1998), her reading of “Calyx” does not foreground SM’s productive and communitarian potential. Hart argues that the anxiety lesbian SM created during the sex wars results from an eroticism that “is evoked precisely in the ambiguity between the real and the performed” (149). Her close-reading of Califia’s “Calyx” comes close to offering a more productive and positive understanding of SM in that she reads the group sex scene as knowledge-producing on two levels. First, the bottom’s performance of submission enables her partner to acquire knowledge about herself, “an educational experience” in which the top, Alex, learns “how to trust herself and her ability to let go” (Hart 152). Second, Hart identifies hope as a central affective component of Roxanne’s performance of submission, which posits “a different structure” of value, knowledge, and experience, a structure that “escapes the closure of representation” (151).

While acknowledging Califia’s emphasis on “tenderness, trust, commitment, fidelity, and equality” in “Calyx,” Hart ultimately emphasizes SM’s oppositional political qualities, characterizing the underlying fantasy of SM as a desire for something that

exists beyond language (159). Indeed, we hear an echo of Bersani in Hart's interpretation of "water sports" in "Calyx,"⁸¹ which she reads as requiring "a loss of inhibition that is tantamount to relinquishing one's hold on the coherent 'self' that marks the transition from infancy to adulthood" (154). Hart's reading comes close to offering something like a positive, productive interpretation of SM when she reads lesbian SM as positing a "different model of continuance" (78), essentially a desire for the stability of marriage and commitment without the foreclosure of sexual pleasure; however, as noted in the Introduction, her discussion of lesbian SM and SM more generally ends on a note that underscores its disruptive potential.

Looking past SM's abstract, disruptive effects reveals how Califia's story reflects broader queer world-making practices that signal the utopian potential of SM. The passage when Tyre explains how Roxanne's new jewelry signifies her queered identity, calls to mind Foucault's often overlooked understanding of identity as a creative force that enables people to "find their pleasure through this identity" when identity is formed around sexual practices, like SM (Foucault, "Sex, Power" 385). While many SM essays equate the experience of coming out as an SM-identified person with coming out about being gay, it is significant that this scene in Califia offers a different type of identity formation that occurs after coming out as SM-identified, where the pleasure of coming solidifies the creation of an SM identity from within the scene.⁸² Here the turn toward leather or SM as a sexual identity is not rooted in sexological taxonomies that pathologize

⁸¹ "Water sports" refers to play with urine.

⁸² Despite the fact that many SM texts will make this leap to SM identity/orientation through the adoption of the language of the "coming out" narrative (denial/shame, being public about desire, ostracization, acceptance/community/ pleasure/elimination of internal conflict), almost no sexuality studies scholarship theorizes SM from the space of identity.

non-procreative sexual practices; rather Tyre's speech demonstrates an awareness of the social and political utility of identity formations.⁸³

The queering of commitment and its ability to innovate new modes of queer relationality is further expanded in Queen's *The Leather Daddy and the Femme*. In this text, the climactic piercing scene occurs at a party for Georgia Strong, the first dominant of Demetrius—Jack's lover and Miranda's other leather daddy. This queer mixed-gender sex party, hosted by a well-respected leatherman, gives Jack, Demetrius, and Miranda the opportunity to publically mark their mutual commitment to each other, to pleasure, and to an SM identity and community.

Under the watchful and encouraging eye of Georgia Strong, Miranda gets her nipples pierced while both Jack and Demetrius penetrate her, declaring their mastery over her (Queen 157). Later that same evening, while Miranda fists Jack, Demetrius "slid his cock in Jack's ass—with [Miranda's] hand already inside" (Queen 159), while Jack gets a Prince Albert piercing. Despite Georgia's surprise at finding Demetrius with a woman, she tells Demetrius "you have family here, not just friends" (Queen 160-1), after which Demetrius thanks Georgia for teaching him that he "could live in my body and my desire exactly the way it is. That if I'm willing, I can have what I want" (Queen 161).

Expanding on the potential for queering modes of commitment and available pleasures through SM, Queen builds on the piercing ceremonies found in Preston and Califia. In doing so, Queen offers a more expansive understanding of SM's productive potential, which suggests how SM becomes capable of creating ". . . forms of sociability that

⁸³ As noted in the Introduction, the first political SM group, The Eulenspiegel Society founded in New York in 1971, was initially called Masochist's Liberation and was modeled on gay, lesbian, and Black liberation politics (Rubin "The Valley of the Kings").

unlinked money and family from the scene of the good life; because they made sex the consequence of public mediations and collective self-activity in a way that made for unpredicted pleasures; because, in turn, they attempted to make a context of support for their practices . . .” (Berlant and Warner 565).

These piercing ceremonies, from three different texts and three different decades, all center around innovations in queer relationality meant to affirm and cement contexts that support SM erotic practice. Indeed, these examples of using SM to publicly declare one’s commitment to one’s partner(s) and ritually marking this commitment with a piercing meant to enhance erotic pleasure constitute “forms of affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity” (Berlant and Warner 562). In other words, the piercing ceremonies become examples of the types of queer counterintimacies that Berlant and Warner see as integral to the project of queer world-making.

Reading Preston and other authors who wrote for and from within queer SM subcultures, reveals how SM is a queer utopian practice that strives to record, create, perpetuate, and improve its community and its pleasures. Certainly the educational tendencies and the formation of alternative modes of relationality that are rooted in pleasure reflect Berlant’s and Warner’s understanding of how “making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation” (558). Returning to such productive tendencies that were inextricable from this subculture and subgenre of gay and lesbian texts, offers a new understanding of SM’s queer potential—distinct from

previous scholarly work that situates SM squarely within theories of queer negativity or antirelationality.

Taken together, these three texts present compelling evidence for revising the prevailing understanding of SM in queer theory as a primarily disruptive, abstract process. These authors' commitment to eroticized education, alternative forms of queer relationality, and community formation, speak to SM erotica's significant role in queer world-making. Specifically, these texts lay the groundwork for a queerer vision of the future by creating an informed community of readers who, through reading, are able to gain both a better understanding of safer sex practices in an SM context and a better understanding of their own erotic desires.

However, recuperating this genealogy of pornography as a significant source of queer theory unveils a complex, and at times fraught, relationship to issues of race and ethnicity. These foundational texts complicate the prevailing assumptions surrounding leather culture's exclusionary whiteness—which, as a result of the overlaps between anti-SM and black feminist movements during the sex wars, has been subjected to myriad, salient critiques. This is not to say that these texts necessarily vindicate leather culture of its predominantly white, male eroticism, but rather that attention to issues of race and class in these texts—and in particular in *Mr. Benson*—reveal the degree to which white authors used pornography as a way to grapple with SM's historically fraught relationship to race. While my discussion will primarily focus on *Mr. Benson* for the ways in which it consistently thematizes issues of race and social difference in a way that Queen's and Califia's texts do not, as in previous sections, my readings of *Mr. Benson* are

supplemented with briefer discussions of how parallel concerns manifest and morph in subsequent texts.

HISTORY, SLAVERY, AND RACE

As mentioned earlier, *Mr. Benson* was originally serialized under the pseudonym Jack Prescott over a series of ten issues in *Drummer* magazine between 1979 and 1980, after which it underwent revisions and was published as a novel by Cleis Press in 1983. Along with the addition of an epilogue for the 1983 publication, comparison of the two versions of *Mr. Benson* reveals other editorial changes in which a more extended discussion of SM's relation to chattel slavery in the United States have been omitted from the published novel.⁸⁴ Given that a great deal of recent SM scholarship tends to display what Ariane Cruz names "the *racial caveat*: a polite jettisoning of race in order to refer to or theorize it in its absence" (49), exploring how race, class, and ethnicity operate in relation to SM becomes key for understanding the full import of a text as influential as *Mr. Benson*. Indeed, the scope of *Mr. Benson*'s influence extends far beyond gay, male leather culture. Many have "commented on the numbers of denim- and leather-clad men (and women) who would stand in line . . . when a new issue appeared. . . . [P]eople have pointed out, it was like the crowds who stood on the docks in New York to grab the latest chapter from a Dickens novel as it was shipped into harbor" (Preston, *My Life* 10), not to mention its wide-ranging intertextual influence, as found in subsequent lesbian and cross-gender, queer SM texts, as discussed in the previous section.

⁸⁴ Italics indicate material published in the original *Drummer* serializations (1979-80) that was omitted from the 1983 novel printing. Corresponding footnotes will indicate the issue, year, chapter, and page number of the quotation in *Drummer*.

That an overt acknowledgement of SM's relation to historical chattel slavery was published in a leather magazine as foundational as *Drummer*—"the first leather magazine with a national (and even international) circulation, *Drummer* [sic] helped establish a common vocabulary of leather, a common set of leather styles, and a common reservoir of leather knowledge" ("Leather Hall of Fame" [2015])—makes it all the more important to study how, why, and with what effect *Mr. Benson*'s editorial changes were made. Though *Mr. Benson* focuses primarily on a relationship between two white men—Jamie and Mr. Benson—issues of race, class, and ethnicity consistently appear in the novel's SM scenes. Significantly, recent SM scholarship has shown how "race play illuminates not only the erotic play of race but also the enduring power of the black/white binary, the history of slavery, and racism itself" (Cruz 73). While the racialized SM scenes in *Mr. Benson* primarily invert racist hierarchies, these discrete disruptions of real-world power dynamics are complicated by Preston's later invocation of Orientalist tropes. In the mystery subplot, gay leather practices become proof of American sexual exceptionalism, the idea that the United States is a privileged space of sexual freedom, which my final section will take up.

Situating the two versions of *Mr. Benson* within debates surrounding SM that circulated between 1979 and 1983, suggests how Preston's editorial changes reflect the far-ranging cultural influence of anti-SM discourses that circulated at the time. Indeed, the period between the novel's initial serialization and its publication in 1983 coincides with the height of the feminist sex wars, which gave rise to an unprecedented proliferation of discourse surrounding the politics of desire, sexuality, pornography, and stigmatized sexual practices, like SM.

Like other SM erotica authors, Preston consistently complicates any easy equation between social privilege and dominance within an SM scene, revealing how SM “encourages a playful, sexually charged, embodied engagement with power, social roles, and cultural stereotypes” (Bauer, “Transgressive and Transformative” 248). Conscious engagements with power and its significance beyond the SM scene also surface in Preston’s reflections on race and representation in SM pornography. In “Who’s Looking: Gender, Race, and Intention in Pornography,” Preston discusses the proliferation of racialized SM pornography that circulated during the Black Power movement; he describes images and stories in which “a white man would try to offer himself to black men to be their slave in an attempt to pay back the African-American community for the sins of white racism” (*My Life* 208), and asks us to consider if “it make[s] any difference that these pornographic works altered the expected roles of white men and black men? Does it make any difference if black men are portrayed as masters in SM porn?” (*My Life* 208).

From the novel’s beginning, Preston explores the relation between SM roles and social power, which can be seen in Preston’s attention to markers of difference, like class and age: “I was to learn Mr. Benson was a wealthy man. Even without the wealth he probably couldn’t have cared less what people thought of him. *Not with an ego that big*” (11).⁸⁵ Though Jamie rightly observes that Mr. Benson’s wealth gives him freedom to openly pursue his desires without fearing social persecution, the omitted phrase about Mr. Benson’s ego implicitly links this sense of entitlement and sexual dominance with his wealth and social status. The link between economic privilege and sexual dominance

⁸⁵ *Drummer*, “Mr. Benson: Premiere episode,” Issue 29 (1979): 21.

within the SM scene is complicated when Jamie meets Mr. Benson's elite group of Topmen, a group of masters whose diverse subject positions destabilize the simple equation of social power with SM roles: there is Tom, Mr. Benson's "black doorman" (*MB* 59); Hans, a blonde-haired and blue-eyed German with a swastika armband (*MB* 50), who turns out to be one of the kidnappers in the mystery subplot; Porytko, a Polish man; Brendan, a black New York City police officer; Mark, "a squatly built bearded man" (*MB* 51); and Frank and Sal, hirsute Italian lovers who jointly own a construction company (*MB* 61).

The racial and class diversity of the Topmen group is not merely a nod to tokenistic inclusion. Together, these men span the breadth of hypermasculine fantasy types that dominated gay leather sexual imagery of the time, as seen in both erotic material and community practices. Indeed, similar emphasis on erotic types that are coded by style of clothing and by profession also characterize the leather Adonises found in Tom of Finland's iconic imagery. Turn to any *Drummer* from this period and one finds in "Drumbeats" (the personals section) a slew of men identifying as or seeking a biker, a "hunky cowboy" (57 [1980]), "ex-police officers looking for other officers" (57 [1980]), a Captain seeking "servile cabin boys" (56 [1980]), "hunky truckers, troopers, cowboys, construction workers, body builders" (57 [1980]), the list goes on and on. These types, which circulated in both *Mr. Benson* and the popular SM publications Preston contributed to, eroticize indicators of social, racial, economic, and physical difference, particularly the physical prowess and hypermasculinity associated with working-class figures. That each of these men assume the dominant role in their SM practice—despite their differing class origins—reflects Rubin's observation that "the social power individuals bring to the

S/M community affects their ability to negotiate within it. . . . But class, race, and gender neither determine nor correspond to the roles adopted for S/M play” (*Coming to Power* 224).

Despite the class diversity amongst the Topmen, Jamie—an SM novice—initially struggles to de-link sexual power dynamics from social reality. From the moment Jamie submits to Mr. Benson, he questions his own motives and the relation between SM and social power. On the morning after his first encounter with Mr. Benson, Jamie wonders: “What does a slave do when he hasn’t been given any orders? That’s what I was now, a slave. I had said the words myself last night, he had accepted it. So, what do I do?” (*MB* 26-7). Jamie further questions his beliefs, wondering, “Did I really believe that, that Mr. Benson was my superior? . . . Everything in my background denied the idea that any man was better than any other. . . . In another time and place I would really have been this man’s slave” (*MB* 29). Though historical role-playing never overtly enters into Jamie and Mr. Benson’s SM practice, in these initial moments, Jamie imagines various historical scenarios in which he might have been Mr. Benson’s slave—Sheik and Arab boy, Norseman and kidnapped English peasant, Turkish potentate and captured Crusader (*MB* 29-30)—each historical fantasy representing a sexual power dynamic defined by real-world social hierarchies.

It is significant that such fantasies only occur at the beginning of Jamie’s relationship and that he eventually recognizes how he used these fantasies “to justify the degradation and humiliation [Mr. Benson] would demand. . . . I was deciding Mr. Benson was the man I wanted to love. . . . I would be a slave in order to love this man” (*MB* 30). For the SM novice, who suddenly finds pleasure in ways he had never previously

imagined, it can be difficult to understand and overcome the internalized social stigma of SM, particularly for the bottom, whose role necessitates a temporary abdication of power (and privilege). Thus, it's understandable that Jamie initially justifies his submission to Mr. Benson through their age and class differences, further rationalizing his submission by recasting these differences within historical contexts. So removed are these contexts from the present moment that—in Jamie's mind—they need not be bound by notions of democracy and social equality. In this sense, Jamie's internal narratives at the beginning of the novel can be linked with how "race play reveals the profound paradox of this enduring fantasy/reality dialectic: even as these practices recite, indeed require 'real, shared world' historical and political references, such play can be imagined, enacted, and narrated as pure fantasy" (Cruz 48). As their relationship progresses and he falls more deeply in love with Mr. Benson, Jamie comes to accept his own submissive desires and the historical fantasies disappear from his mind.

Significantly, Jamie's initial curiosity reads quite differently in the *Drummer* version in which he overtly acknowledges the racialized aspects that inhere in the "complicated dynamics of reproduction, subversion, and transgression [that] characterize BDSM stagings of slavery" (Cruz 41). In *Drummer* the passage reads: "What does a slave do when he hasn't been given any orders? That's what I was now, a slave. I had said the words myself last night, he had accepted it. So, what do I do? *What was this going to mean, being a man's slave, in a country that had taken away a man's right to be a slave. Fuck Abe Lincoln!*" (26-7).⁸⁶ The direct reference to chattel slavery and Abraham Lincoln demonstrate the degree to which the history of slavery in the U.S. forms part of

⁸⁶ *Drummer*, "Part Two," Issue 30 (1979): 27.

the original novel's consciousness. In a sense, the omitted lines problematically situate Jamie within the conventional role of white men who feel their behavior is constrained by political correctness or anti-racist activism. Jamie's omitted lines can certainly be read as evidence of a flippant disregard for the horrors of slavery and its racist effects, which pervade American culture. However, wholly discounting this passage as the complaint of a privileged, white man ignores the complex irony at work.

In part, these references can be attributed to Jamie's struggle to reconcile Modern notions of a democratic society and egalitarian relationships with his physical and emotional pleasure in submitting to Mr. Benson, as previously discussed. By adding an historical and ethical undertone to Jamie's shame, the direct invocation of chattel slavery complicates and contextualizes the sources of Jamie's struggles. Within this seemingly glib comment, Jamie reveals how the history of slavery has left the U.S. not only with a deeply entrenched legacy of racism and social inequalities, but also with an additional stigmatization of certain modes of erotic expression that make the history of slavery far more present than hegemonic discourses would admit.

Jamie's excised thoughts about American slavery reflect "the moralizing force of political correctness that polices sexuality, the often blurred yet fundamental binary between fantasy/reality and mind/body" (Cruz 53). While such forces are particularly problematic for SM practitioners of color given how "black slaves/submissives/bottoms . . . have traditionally been shackled by other people's political correctness in the exercise of our expression" (Mike Bond, qtd. in Cruz 108-9), it is significant that these lines are thought by a gay, white character. In doing so, Jamie gives voice to something leather culture has tended to (purposefully) forget: "the racial axis of BDSM's fundamental

master/slave dialectic” (Cruz 53). To some degree, Jamie’s acknowledgement partially amends Viola Johnson’s critique of the leather community for how “as a tribe we have come to accept the slave-master relationship, while ignoring (for the most part) its racial origin” (qtd. in Cruz 53).⁸⁷

At the same time, the expunged lines evoke the type of trivialization of slavery that anti-SM discourses emphasize, as seen in Alice Walker’s “A Letter of the Times, or Should This Sado-Masochism Be Saved?” (1982) and in Karen Sims and Rose Mason’s “Racism and Sadomasochism: A Conversation with Two Black Lesbians” (1982), to name just two examples. Although both pieces specifically focus on the controversy regarding (interracial) SM within the lesbian and feminist communities, these authors’ emphasis on the historical valences of racially charged words, like “slave” and “master,” and their identification of the underlying privilege that makes SM practice possible are representative of the types of anti-SM discourses circulating between *Mr. Benson*’s serialization and later publication.

While the Sims and Mason piece specifically critiques a televised documentary on SM that portrayed an interracial lesbian couple in which the white woman adopted the role of mistress and the black woman played the role of slave,⁸⁸ Walker’s fictional piece critiques a documentary that appears loosely based on the one discussed by Sims and Mason. In Walker, the narrator describes her and her students’ affective reaction to this documentary:

⁸⁷ Viola Johnson is an activist, author, and leatherwoman who has been involved in the SM community since the 1970s.

⁸⁸ *SM: One Foot Out of the Closet*. KQED (1980).

I was incensed to think of the hard struggle of my students . . . to put themselves in enslaved women's skins, and then to see their struggle mocked, and the actual enslaved *condition* of literally millions of our mothers trivialized—because two ignorant women insisted on their right to act out publicly a “fantasy” that still strikes terror in black women's hearts. (207)⁸⁹

Walker identifies the mockery and trivialization of slavery as the most problematic aspect of contemporary SM practice and though no specific mention is made of *Mr. Benson*, such a critique of SM could certainly be applied to Jamie's “Fuck Abe Lincoln!” in the *Drummer* version. Walker also articulates the problematic ethics that arise with the depoliticization of personal pleasure and SM's fantasy/reality divide. Indeed, a great deal of pro-SM writing rests on such claims, which often obfuscate the impact on audiences when such images leave the bedroom and circulate in the public sphere.

Sims and Mason are equally critical of the trivialization of slavery they see occurring in both white and interracial SM practice, yet their analysis highlights the political effects of SM within black feminism and in the women's movement more generally, moving beyond Walker's focus on individual, affective response. Mason explains, “I've never had a choice as to whether I want to deal with power issues. . . .

⁸⁹ It's worth noting that Califia countered Walker's critique by arguing that “in an attempt to prove that S/M is racist, Walker describes these women [who were Samois members] as a white woman top and a black woman bottom. In fact, the top in this couple is a Latina lesbian” (*Coming to Power* 270), though this response obfuscates the broader history of chattel slavery in the Western Hemisphere. Given that minority status cannot absolve complicity in oppression, Califia's fact-checking does not wholly vindicate the women's participation in a documentary with such triggering effects; however, the ethnic identity of the Samois women in the KQED documentary does complicate Walker's reliance on the anti-SM assumption that SM sexuality is invariably a replication of real-world power inequalities.

And there are white women in the movement who are very unaware that that's what it is, that it is a privilege that goes along with your skin color" (103). While Sims argues that "there are so many things we have to deal with and the first one is defining for ourselves what it means to be a Black feminist. . . . And how we as Black women strengthen our bonds with each other. Not by controlling or having power over each other but by together defining our future" (104-5). Both Sims and Mason articulately delineate SM's divisive effects: the resulting horizontal aggression amongst activist movements, the concomitant de-emphasis on pressing political issues, and how the choice to eroticize power relations is a privilege.⁹⁰

However, the anti-SM examples cited here are predicated on the assumption that contemporary SM practice primarily, or even exclusively, takes its erotic charge from the vestiges of American chattel slavery. While terms like "slave" and "master" have taken on—what have arguably become—unsheddable racial overtones, such overtones coexist with a multiplicity of meanings that inhere in these words. Despite the problematic racialized connotations of such words, it is necessary to distinguish between their general usage in SM practice and their usage in SM practice that explicitly engages in "race play," which is, "in broad terms . . . any type of play that openly embraces and explores the (either 'real' or assumed) racial identity of the players within the context of a BDSM scene. The prime motive in a 'Race Play' scene is to underscore and investigate the

⁹⁰ Despite evidence to the contrary found in practitioner-produced SM texts, a great deal of lesbian-feminist literature of the time presumes that relationships inflected with SM erotics are antithetical to egalitarian partnerships, an argument that elides the pervasiveness of power dynamics in all human relations. Specifically, such claims obscure what pro-SM writing identifies as the "emotional SM" of the lesbian community and how "pain is simply the inevitable result of unacknowledged power roles. . . . These pain dynamics show up in friendships & political work as often as in lover relationships" (Juicy Lucy, *Coming to Power* 32-3).

challenges of racial or cultural differences” (Mollena Williams, “Race play interview—part I” n.p.).

In “A Letter of the Times” the reader is offered no contextualizing details beyond the race and roles of the lesbian couple portrayed in the documentary; there is no direct evidence—like historical costumes, iron manacles, or racial epithets—that supports interpreting their SM relationship as one defined by race play. Though the triggering effects described in Walker’s story are produced regardless of the SM couple’s intentionality or the specific nature of their SM play, it is interesting that Walker’s narrator mobilizes what is arguably an equally triggering exercise for her students. Specifically, Cruz observes how Walker’s narrator requires her students to imagine themselves in the role of slave, mistress, or master in order to “come to terms, in imagination and feeling, with what it meant” (Walker, qtd. in Cruz 39). As Cruz notes, “this exercise requires the same ‘playing’ of race that Walker denounces in BDSM” (39). It is ironic that the “playing of race” the narrator requires of her students seems allowable within an educational (i.e. non-sexual) context given the narrator’s presumed anti-racist stance. And yet, the narrator fails to consider the intentions of the women in the documentary, so much so that she appears to have, as Ummni Khan observes, “*no regard* for Black women who embrace a sexuality she finds politically repugnant” (69). In doing so, Walker’s narrator misses the underlying importance of intention within SM practice, or, as Mollena Williams puts it, SM is distinguished from real-world violence because “I CONSENT to my Power Exchange relationship. The INTENTION is emotional, physical and spiritual fulfillment for all parties involved. The goal of the exchange is to explore

these dynamics with COMPASSION at the fore and at the core” (“Race play vs. racism” n.p.).

While Walker’s piece condemns SM’s effects on non-participants, something that Williams’s comments on consent and intention cannot account for, Sims and Mason take direct issue with the perceived anti-egalitarian nature of SM sexual scenes. In part, this perception arises from the proliferation and increased visibility of SM subcultures at the same time that myriad activist movements influenced by the egalitarian ethos of Civil Rights were coalescing—from women of color and lesbian feminisms to gay civil rights. However, presuming that the power dynamics present in an SM scene extend into broader relationship dynamics obscures the submissive partner’s agency and power in the scene, as well as the degree to which most SM practitioners intentionally cordon off their play, such that the SM scene and participant roles are “very clearly framed by means of a contract or a preliminary negotiation that sets its boundaries both in temporal and spatial terms and in terms of the range of activities that the interaction may include” (Ziv 183). Put more simply, the power dynamics in an SM scene do not generally extend into the social realm. Like other anti-SM arguments, Sims and Mason’s work extrapolates SM roles far beyond the scope of the sexual scene; in doing so, they miss a key point: the “masochist contract scripts the dynamics of power in ways that challenge the master-slave relationship. In conferring power upon the master only through the authority of the slave, it represents a kind of subversion of power relations” (Cruz 54).

Furthermore, the focus of anti-SM writing on the historical legacy of slavery in the United States tends to overlook other relevant histories that might partially clarify the origins of SM’s eroticization of power, particularly those outlined in my Introduction: “It

is very important to remember that the modern leather scene . . . first formalized itself out of the group of men who were soldiers returning home after World War II” (Baldwin 107). In the 1940s, a gay leather subculture began to coalesce amongst men seeking the type of homosocial, masculine camaraderie and discipline they had come to enjoy while enlisted. In this sense, the initial, inspiring erotics of gay SM primarily focused on hypermasculinity, “brotherhood[,] and group solidarity” (Rubin, “Miracle Mile” 254). Similarly, the eroticization of hierarchical power amongst these men stemmed from “gay war veterans who learned about the value and pleasure of discipline and hard work” (Baldwin 108). This history suggests that leather culture and its erotics of power were largely inspired by soldiers’ shared desire after demobilization to “retain the most satisfying elements of their military experience and . . . hang out socially and sexually with other masculine gay men” (Baldwin 108), far more than gay leather culture “mine[d] racialized violence and power hierarchies to stage the paradigms of domination and submission” (Cruz 41).

Indeed, leather culture has gone out of its way to distance itself, often through elision, from any association with the undeniable horrors of chattel slavery in the U.S. When pre-WWII history is mentioned within SM texts, it is most commonly in reference to antecedents of modern SM found in pornographic literature, like that of the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (Townsend, *Handbook* 251), or in pre-Modern social hierarchies, like those initially imagined by Jamie in *Mr. Benson*. For example, in his influential *The Leatherman’s Handbook* (1972), Townsend nostalgically, albeit problematically, eroticizes a Spartan and his helot, an ancient captured in battle, and even Mediterranean slave markets (6-7)—offering such examples as evidence of SM’s long-

standing allure in the human psyche. Significantly, Townsend omits entirely even the remotest reference to the enslavement of Africans in the United States. This elision can be read as a disidentificatory move at a moment in history when the Civil Rights movement had made the systematic, structural racism that is chattel slavery's legacy an undeniable presence in the American consciousness. Furthermore, in the context of gay civil rights, this distancing impulse becomes all the more urgent in the case of gay SM, since "the formation of notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality emerged in the United States through (and not merely parallel to) a discourse saturated with assumptions about the racialization of bodies" (Somerville 4). Indeed, the removal of references to chattel slavery in *Mr. Benson's* 1983 publication effectively sanitized Preston's work for a wider audience at a time when homosexuality was striving for normalization and SM remained homosexuality's abject other. In this sense, the editorial changes can be read as a strategy for disclaiming some of SM's cultural stigma through elision.

Though historical role-playing never enters into Jamie's SM with Mr. Benson, Preston does explore the implications of SM practice in which race is explicitly eroticized. At one point, the reader learns that Jamie's white friend, Rocco, has begun an SM relationship with one of the other Topmen in Mr. Benson's group, Brendan. In a conversation with Jamie, Rocco reveals how Brendan "believes in all this master and slave shit, especially between whites and blacks" (*MB* 80). Between Rocco and Brendan, "it's always something racial. Like last week when they came in and they were making like we were in Africa and that I was a white slaver they had captured. . . . They used my body to make up for all the African children that had ever been sold off to America as slaves" (*MB* 81). When Jamie begins to feel pity for his friend, Rocco explains, "'It's all

wonderful” and “the look on Rocco’s face was the glazed expression of a totally satisfied man” (*MB* 82). Interestingly, in both anti-SM critiques previously cited, white dominance and black submission in SM are wholly condemned, while the inversion of racist hierarchies in the SM scene goes unmentioned. Through Rocco’s comments, the reader can assume that such SM play functions as an erotic and political catharsis for Brendan, who seems to take pleasure from this inversion of racist hierarchies. Though fraught with a somewhat vengeful morality, Rocco and Brendan’s SM constitutes a mode of interracial SM that remained largely under-theorized within the 1980s feminist sex wars, although recent queer theory and black feminist scholarship have taken up this topic.

In some ways, Rocco and Brendan’s SM seems to align with Elizabeth Freeman’s theorization of SM as an erotohistoriographic practice, in which “S/M relentlessly physicalizes the encounter with history and thereby contributes to a reparative criticism that takes up the materials of a traumatic past and remixes them in the interests of new possibilities for being and knowing” (144). However, Freeman’s understanding of recuperative racial or ethnic SM play is limited by her emphasis on the re-enactment of historical roles (and not their inversion), as a way of coping with historical trauma, one that is equally available to myriad subjects, like a “modern-day Jewish woman [who] might participate in a reenactment of some horror from the Holocaust, experiencing anti-Semitism in more scripted and overt ways than she does in her everyday life, testing her limits, feeling a corporeal, painful, and/or even pleasurable link to her ancestors” (143-4).

In contrast to Freeman, Ariane Cruz’s work focuses on the present effects that arise from the intertwining of SM, race, and history, noting how, in addition to “pleasure,

race play perhaps becomes a kind of critical negotiation for the abject black body—a way of working not through the past, but perhaps in and through the present” (73). Significantly, Cruz demonstrates that “while BDSM might not heal a historical wound[,] . . . it might serve as a stage . . . for *replaying* primordial scenes of black-white sexual intimacy and the imbrications of pleasure, power, race, and sex. Perhaps such narratives of black-white interracial sexual aggression speak not only about the psychic past but also about felt blackness in the present—the sentience of the black body” (72). Building on Cruz’s observations it becomes possible to see how Brendan and Rocco’s relationship sheds light on the potentially productive politics of SM and how SM play can help us “understand the impulses to power and submission in oneself” (Young 104). By taking on performative roles in SM scenes, Rocco and Brendan can increase their knowledge of how power, race, and class have historically functioned and how they function in contemporary society. In this sense, it is significant that in the historicized scenes Rocco describes, he is assigned an historically white, male role of power. This detail distinguishes Brendan and Rocco’s recuperative play from the more common “black over white model” in which “submissive white men have always had the freedom to engage in their form of ‘affirmative action’ race play at the hands of ‘powerful black women.’ It’s considered cute and PC” while black submissives enjoy no such freedoms (Mike Bond, qtd. in Cruz 108). In contrast, Brendan’s pleasure is animated by transforming what was historically an abject role into one capable of physically overpowering an historically white, male role of dominance (e.g. slave trader).

While Rocco and Brendan have chosen to draw on racial histories for the erotic charge of their SM, their choice is not characteristic of all SM practice, which can deploy

a seemingly endless array of historical, contemporary, or fantastical contexts as sources of erotic power; as Amalia Ziv observes, “both the interaction (the s/m scene) and the phantasmatic script it enacts are *representations*, in the sense that they draw on, imitate, or re-present—usually in hyperbolic mode—various social power relations or situations that emblemize such relations” (182). Given the myriad power relations Preston could have chosen to represent, it is significant that his foundational work acknowledges the problematic vestiges of chattel slavery that cling to SM terminology despite practitioners’ best intentions or subsequent attempts to deny these links. It is also significant for the ways in which Preston uses the Brendan and Rocco scenes to demonstrate how SM can destabilize—rather than blindly deny—such connotations.

Thus, we might answer the question Preston rhetorically posed in “Who’s Looking: Gender, Race, and Intention in Pornography” by saying that the representation of socially and sexually empowered black, gay men as both tops and skilled SM masters matters a great deal. This is particularly true given that Preston circulated images of black dominance in a text like *Mr. Benson*, which served as an introduction to SM for many gay men and lesbians at the time. However, the 1983 erasure of Jamie’s acknowledgement of SM’s relation to historical slavery significantly altered the scope of this influence. Indeed, the elision of chattel slavery from the novel’s consciousness might even be said to contribute, or at least enable, contemporary white SM practitioners’ common perception that “slave auctions and SM in general are about abstract or neutral, not racialized, power” (Weiss 194). As mentioned earlier in Viola Johnson’s comments, such perceptions often lead to the exclusion of SM practitioners of color in public scenes, which itself contributes to contemporary SM scholarship’s evocation of

“the black body as a site of disappearance,” which constitutes a “rhetorical expunction that translates into a violent, albeit familiar, act of racial disavowal” (Cruz 49). While Rocco and Brendan’s relationship can be read as a reparative SM practice that mutually pleasures this interracial couple, the editorial changes for the 1983 publication along with the mystery subplot prevent *Mr. Benson* from being read—as a whole—as a reparative critique of racism.

Despite Preston’s representation of what has come to be known as “race play,” his descriptions of Rocco and Brendan’s interactions do not explicitly fetishize racial difference or invoke stereotypes (though Preston’s Orientalist subplot complicates this). The same, however, cannot be said of all the texts examined here. For instance, in Queen’s *The Leather Daddy and the Femme*, Demetrius—the only black male character in the text—is also the only self-identified bisexual. Additionally, Miranda mentions how Demetrius’s “dick must have been as big around as my wrist—at least. It had the most prominent head on it I’d ever seen” (Queen 49); indeed, it is so large that Miranda blacks out from lack of oxygen while performing oral sex (Queen 51). Queen’s representation of Demetrius reflects pornographic tropes surrounding black male sexuality and a stereotypical fetishization of racial difference. Yet at other moments, Queen’s text paradoxically disavows the erotic charge of race and in doing so the text attempts to disclaim SM’s relation to historical power imbalances by explicitly distancing her characters from racialized erotics. Specifically, there is an attempt to side-step the issue of race when Demetrius discusses his first SM experience with a man; he mentions how he “barely registered this man’s color [as white]—only his sex. Only his sense of authority” (Queen 87). That Demetrius’s first gay, SM experience is through his

submission to an authoritative white man appears to replicate historical power imbalances.

By de-eroticizing that dynamic's racial components, Demetrius's recollections allow Queen to skirt its racial and political implications. Here, the disavowal of race reflects the generalized anxiety surrounding SM's relation to social power dynamics and more specifically, it belies white anxiety over interracial SM scenes that was no doubt magnified by the context from which Queen wrote: in the late 90s, notions of "political correctness," "multiculturalism," and "color blindness" dominated mainstream, public discourses, which would have been especially apparent in a city like San Francisco at the time. Queen's text fails to acknowledge the ways in which this top's authority is necessarily bound up with his white, male privilege and in doing so Queen fails to explore how race has an effect on sexual dynamics even when the participants refrain from eroticizing racialized historical trauma or contemporary violence. Without such explorations,⁹¹ this scene becomes just another instance of a white pornographer struggling to disconnect SM from violence and non-consent in moments that are challenging because of their apparent replication of historical precedent.⁹²

While the explicitness of Queen's attempt to de-eroticize race represents a paradox in the larger context of her text, the de-eroticization of difference functions quite differently in Califia's work, like "Calyx," where it becomes another way to signal SM's

⁹¹ There is more intentional engagement with issues surrounding race and SM in various anthologies (e.g. *Leatherfolk* and *The Second Coming*) that include contributions by women and men of color. Perhaps this is a limitation of (white-authored) fiction.

⁹² In female-authored, heterosexual SM pornography, one might expect to find similar contortions of language that disavow SM's relation to historical and social power hierarchies, yet almost invariably such relationships are presented *without* commentary that belies anxiety over the political correctness or feminist politics of SM.

utopic potential. “Calyx” maintains its distance from eroticizing differences of any sort, even while marking racial, ethnic, class, and gendered differences through brief character descriptions, as seen in the composition of the group sex scene, which includes: Anne-Marie whose specialty is Victorian style bondage and caning; Joyous Day, a Jamaican woman, whose specialty is clothespins; Kay, a more feminine leather woman whose specialty is fisting; EZ who is described as a butch “boy-punk” that begins the scene as a top and ends it as a bottom; Chris, a heavily tattooed rocker; Tyre, the femme switch who owns and runs the Calyx; Alex, who sports both a shaved head and a cod-piece; and finally, Tyre’s chauffeur, Michael, a woman who uses female pronouns, and whose gender expression is so masculine that she passes in heteronormative culture as male.⁹³ Aside from these brief descriptions, Califia offers no further back-story, directing our attention instead to the story’s present: a queer community of women whose performative identities resist heteronormative interpellation. In part, the lack of back-story indicates how SM enables participants to shed their heteronormative origins and socially-constructed identities to such a degree that they are not necessary for either narrative coherence or SM pleasure. Given how identities within the SM scene are both mutable *and* not inherently tied to social identities, the characters’ community- and identity-building practices circumvent heteronormative social structures through the formation of a momentary sexual community (i.e. the group sex scene) that is demarcated from the exterior world.

⁹³ Michael has a blond mustache (“Calyx” 139), and she “went out and bought herself a dick” (“Calyx” 226), which she wears every day beneath male military uniforms.

As noted earlier in my discussion of characters' role fluidity within the SM scene, these texts—and Califia's especially—partially suggest how SM's productive potential emerges from practitioners' experimentation with and access to an array of subject positions through SM. At times, this type of experimentation can subvert heteronormative gender prescriptions and racial and class barriers, though this imaginative access to myriad roles should not be understood as either an erasure of racial difference in the name of weak multiculturalism or as a denial of how race and other identity markers form an important component of embodied erotic practice. Instead, playing with and circumventing difference by delinking social identity from one's SM role returns us to the productive power of fantasy. For Rodríguez, acknowledging the eroticism of racialized experience works "to make queer sense of our lives as the subjects of power, a sense that begins to become comprehensible only within the frames of queer sociality . . . a sense that is always just a sense, a gesture toward a way of knowing that betrays its own desire for futurity" (345). Indeed, Rodríguez's explanation clarifies the relation between sexual fantasies, race, and queer utopian longings.

In Califia's fiction and in Preston's too, playing with power through SM allows individuals to make sense of their varied relations to pleasure and power. In turn, these representations of SM give rise to the embodied (erotic) pleasures of reading, which can encourage readers to imagine and pursue new forms of queer intersubjective relations. Moreover, this shared access to affective experiences of power and submission generate more nuanced understandings of the dynamics of power and privilege, which suggest SM's "political potential in that it enable[s] . . . [practitioners] to question cultural

assumptions about power in general and sex and gender specifically” (Bauer, “Transgressive and Transformative” 236).

However, not all cultural assumptions about power are equally available for experimentation in real world SM communities. As Bauer’s study of dyke/trans BDSM communities reveals, the transformative effects of SM role-playing appear more limited with regards to race or class, since role-playing can “overemphasiz[e] stereotypes or transgre[ss] cultural taboos around age, class, and especially race in a way that reinscribes rather than questions dominant images” (“Transgressive and Transformative” 244), as we saw in Queen’s fiction. Indeed, the problematic effects of racial and ethnic stereotypes become especially apparent in *Mr. Benson*. Specifically, this chapter will conclude with a study of how Preston’s valorization of SM as a unique mode of queer intersubjective relations problematically relies on an invocation of American sexual exceptionalism that is animated by exaggerated Orientalist stereotypes.

VIOLENCE: THE ONLY PERVERSION

As noted earlier, as *Mr. Benson* progresses, theorizations of SM practice and its significance are elaborated upon through juxtaposition with improper, dangerous, or abusive forms of SM. Beyond a comparison with the anonymous sadist who rapes Jamie, a theory of safe and healthy SM is generated through comparison with the ultimate perversion of eroticized power relations: forced prostitution. When the first sections of *Mr. Benson* were serialized in *Drummer*, Preston suddenly realized that his story had no plot: “the sex was okay, but what the hell were these characters going to *do*?”, his solution was to “devise an evil scheme where mean tops were kidnapping good bottoms

and selling them into white slavery” (Preston, *My Life* 9-10). Significantly, white slavery and abuse are often invoked by SM-detractors in their critiques of SM practice, like when John Stoltenberg places consensual SM on a continuum of behaviors, “from teasing and tickling at one end through beating and binding to torture and murder at the other” (86). The leap between sexual slavery/rape and SM practice that SM-detractors so easily make is, for Preston, an unconscionable perversion of SM. Indeed, Mr. Benson makes this clear when he reflects on Jamie’s ordeal: “every time I look at Jamie and think about that poor guy in the hands of someone who would mistreat him, it just sends me up the wall. What kind of *pervert* would play top and then kidnap a little guy like that” (italics mine, Preston, *MB* 93)?

The relative sexual freedom available to Preston when he wrote *Mr. Benson*, offers some context for his inclusion of the white slavery mystery plot, which is fairly unique amongst popular gay and lesbian SM erotica. Within the safety of a robust gay male, leather community, Preston was at liberty to play with the pejorative stereotypes often associated with SM—a privilege that was not shared by SM lesbians, whose fiction was far less likely to include non-consensual sexual activity. By situating extreme sexual acts—such as water sports, body modification (piercing and branding), intense corporal punishment, and the demanding rituals of a full-time master/slave dynamic—in the context of a consensual SM relationship that became emblematic of the ideal SM experience amongst queer leatherfolk, Preston effectively decouples SM from its cultural

association with “perversion.”⁹⁴ In Preston’s novel, the word “pervert” is used only in reference to the illegal kidnapping, abuse, and sale of trusting bottoms. Thus, the moral vacuity of and sexual abuse perpetuated by the international white slavery ring, whose owners exploit the type of trust SM practitioners expect, becomes the true perversion of all sexual desire.

In this sense, Rocco and Brendan’s relationship functions as the privileged opposite of the only other interracial sexual relations within the text: the abuses perpetrated against Jamie, Rocco, and Rick when they are kidnapped into white slavery by Hans, a member of the Topmen, and Abdul. While Rocco and Brendan are situated within a society that has, at least nominally, progressed beyond legalized slavery, a “modern” society, that can accommodate racially-inflected consensual SM, Preston’s Orientalist subplot relies on the assumption that premodern cultures and social hierarchies still exist, particularly in the Middle East. Thus, the mystery subplot reifies Arab stereotypes by associating Middle Eastern culture with non-consensual *white slavery*, in the most literal sense. Moreover, the binary upon which the subplot relies effectively highlights a presumed American sexual exceptionalism, epitomized by the freedom to engage in SM pleasure in the U.S. and the assumption that social privilege need not enter into SM power dynamics.⁹⁵

Despite the fact that Preston’s pornographic worlds are “full of men from African, Asian, Latin, and European backgrounds” and he believes “it is a crude cliché in

⁹⁴ This distancing from perversion that Preston performs is distinct from the reclamation of the term by other leather authors and communities, such as Samois’s statement of purpose in *What Color is Your Handkerchief: A Lesbian S/M Sexuality Reader* (1979) in which they declare themselves “radical perverts.”

⁹⁵ This is not to say that Preston (or his text) naively assumes that in the U.S. “everyone is really equal” despite race and class differences, but rather that one should refrain from presuming that social power automatically determines one’s sexual role in an SM context.

pornography for a white writer to describe only blond men as being attractive, and I avoid it at all costs” (Preston, *My Life* 257), Preston’s differentiation between SM and “perversion” rests on a problematic equation of perversion with national/ethnic Otherness in the mystery subplot. Though non-whiteness is not *tout court* seen as the perversion—recall Rocco and Brendan—the stigmatization of Otherness in *Mr. Benson* is predicated on identifying the United States as a modern space of sexual liberation. Through an invocation of Orientalist tropes that associate non-Western spaces with sexual excess and premodern social structures, *Mr. Benson*’s mystery subplot can be read as a precursor to Jasbir Puar’s theorization of “homosexual sexual exceptionalism [which] occurs through stagings of U.S. nationalism via a praxis of sexual othering, one that exceptionalizes the identities of U.S. homosexualities vis-à-vis Orientalist constructions of ‘Muslim sexuality’” (4). As Puar observes, this sexual exceptionalism sees the joining of national heteronormativity with national homonormativity since “the terms of degeneracy have shifted such that homosexuality is no longer a priori excluded from nationalist formations” (2). Though published over thirty years before the events of 9/11, which gave rise to the homonationalism that Puar theorizes, *Mr. Benson*’s invocation of Orientalist discourse and sexual exceptionalism enables consensual SM to attach itself to homonationalist legitimacy in the context of the novel. In contrast, Puar’s text demonstrates how, by the early 2000s, SM had become paradigmatic of the type of perverse otherness that was excluded from the American national imaginary.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Puar sees this exclusion of SM occurring in multiple directions: first, the association of masochistic desire with terrorist Others, as illustrated by *South Park*, and second, through the association of the Abu Ghraib torture scandal with the individual perversion (i.e. SM desire) of the perpetrators, thus enabling the State to disavow such practices as anomalous and distance the events of Abu Ghraib from U.S. military and imperialist practices.

From the eroticization of Abdul as a “dream of dark beauty” with “black body hair,” the subplot moves beyond a generalized erotic fascination with brown Otherness when Jamie realizes specifically that “Abdul was Arab!” (Preston, *MB* 181). When brought to Abdul’s private quarters to be tested, Jamie observes how “there was a non-Western air to the space. . . . The walls were hung with rich oriental carpets. . . . The scene was like something out of *A Thousand and One Nights*. . . . Abdul sat in the midst of a large mound of pillows and sucked on a water pipe” (*MB* 181-2). This portion of the novel depicts Arabs in “traditional” robes in a harem-like space that is haunted by a threat of castration for the prisoners. These details are characteristic of Orientalist tropes and even more specifically of tropes found in Victorian-era pornography, which was often set in whole or in part in a Turkish harem. Indeed, the mystery subplot parodies the “Lustful Turks ‘with enormous sex organs,’ who solidified into an important stock character of Victorian pornographic literature” (Quataert 10, qtd. in Romanets 96). This link is underscored by Jamie’s recollection of Abdul’s face all over the city, on billboards, and in magazines. Abdul, Jamie realizes, is the face of Camel cigarettes, “the second-most-famous cigarette model in the country,” who sent “many people off to the shores of Turkey” (*MB* 175).

Significantly, the eroticization of Otherness operates multi-directionally and we find a fetishization of whiteness on the part of the Arabs, who specifically seek well-trained, American bottoms: “That’s why so many blonds, only fair-haired guys, only the ones who were so good looking” were kidnapped (*MB* 170).⁹⁷ The mystery subplot

⁹⁷ One can read the kidnapping of blonde bottoms as an acknowledgement that whiteness, like other ethnic markers, is available for (racial) fetishization in a way that is characteristic of queer sexual subcultures, as

depends on binaries that are represented as irreconcilable opposites, which highlight “bad” and “actual” Arab slavery with “good” and “consensual” American SM. Calling to mind Brendan’s inversion of racist, sexual hierarchies, Abdul also invokes a vengeful logic to explain his pleasure, like when he threatens Rick, a fellow cigarette model who gained international fame working for American tobacco—“you have no idea what great satisfaction it gave me to see the well-known symbol of American manhood fitting an Arab dildo up his fine ass. No, my friend, it is not the will of Allah for you to be a sex slave. . . . Every sheik must have a well-guarded harem. It must be staffed by the most powerful and skilled and forceful . . . eunuchs” (*MB* 187-8). This passage problematically intertwines Islam with premodern eroticism, like harems and sexual excess. While the sadistic games Abdul plays with his victims echo the logic of Brendan and Rocco’s dynamic, Abdul’s activities lack the mutual pleasure and consent enjoyed by Brendan and Rocco, rendering Abdul’s sexual practice distinct from the SM dynamics portrayed throughout the text.

Although homoeroticism is characteristic of 20th-century Orientalist tropes, Preston’s mystery subplot has far more in common with 19th-century Orientalist discourses, specifically captivity narratives—which expressed anxiety over Americans being kidnapped and enslaved along the Barbary Coast. As Paul Baepler observes, Barbary captivity narratives allowed the writer to “clearly establish a moral and cultural difference based on the ‘unmoral,’ ‘unlawful,’ ‘inhuman’ act of abduction itself, which

opposed to the unmarked whiteness found in mainstream, heterosexual pornography. Tim Dean offers an extended discussion of whiteness as a fetish category in *Unlimited Intimacy*. However, the specificity of whiteness in this context could also have more to do with the type of vindicating pleasure that comes from an inversion of racist hierarchies, akin to the dynamic between Brendan and Rocco, except here without consent.

begins to define a widening gulf between the civilized and the barbaric” (97). Preston’s Orientalist narrative functions in much the same way, but with a homoerotic twist; he modifies the specifics of traditional Orientalist captivity narratives by replacing moral Christians with trusting SM bottoms and Barbary pirates seeking ransom with wealthy Arabs possessing large disposable incomes used to feed insatiable sexual appetites.

Rocco and Brendan’s inversion of American chattel slavery’s racial binary is represented as a narrative of progress that differentiates contemporary American SM from America’s own inhuman and barbaric past, as well as from the illegal activities associated with the Middle East; in doing so, this binary highlights American sexual exceptionalism. Thus, the comparatively unreformed Arabs in the subplot become relics of a barbaric history that persists into the Modern world. The moralist schema established by the juxtaposition of illegal slavery in the Middle East and pleasurable SM in the United States relies upon a basic Orientalist trope, the “central temporal schema whereby the Arabs are currently ‘late,’ ‘delayed,’ and ‘behind.’ They are late in their movement toward modernity, seen as the time of ‘democracy,’ and are located behind ‘Europe’ and its American extension, seen as the site of ‘democracy’” (Massad 27).

While it might seem odd that Preston’s mystery subplot has more in common with Orientalist discourses circulating in America in the early 19th century, Preston’s—likely unconscious—reinterpretation of captivity narratives might be clarified by two important historical contexts that coincide with *Mr. Benson*’s initial serialization. First, the 1979 Iran Hostage Crisis increased anxiety in the U.S. over the safety of Americans abroad. That the Crisis lasted for over 400 days, which coincide with the period when Preston wrote sections of *Mr. Benson* for *Drummer*, partially accounts for the mystery subplot’s

similarity to 19th-century Orientalist discourse. Indeed, 19th-century captivity narratives are also historically rooted in anxiety over Americans' vulnerability in the Middle East, which became particularly acute after the Revolutionary War, when the U.S. was suddenly without the British Navy's protection and American mercantile trade was threatened.

Second, a police raid at the Mark IV bathhouse in Los Angeles suggests an equally relevant historical context. During the raid,

the Los Angeles Police Department, after weeks of planning, freed the gay slaves who were being marketed in an auction on April 10, 1976. . . . [The police] descended on the bath house as if they were the saviors of civilization, fighters of the last battle for Constantinople or something . . . a fleet of buses waited to carry away the evil masters of the White Slave Trade. (Bean, "L.A. Police" 3)

The raid of the charity slave auction, an auction organized by John C. Embry—of *Drummer*—to benefit the Gay Community Services Center, received a great deal of coverage in both *Drummer* and *The Advocate*, both of which Preston frequently wrote for.⁹⁸ The event became so infamous that leathermen began wearing buttons that ironically read, "The L.A.P.D. FREED the Slaves April 10, 1976." Reading *Mr. Benson* through the historical context of the misguided police raid reveals how Preston's Orientalist subplot also functioned parodically—at least at the time of its publication; this is particularly apparent in the subplot's farcical climax in which Mr. Benson, Brendan,

⁹⁸ Preston served as editor for *The Advocate* in the early 1970s. Additionally, if you count all the work published under pseudonyms, according to Preston, he was the most published author in *Drummer* history.

and several armed police officers infiltrate the white slavery ring, dramatically shed their pseudo-Arab garb mid-auction, and rescue Jamie and the other kidnapped bottoms.

In an effort to underscore the centrality of consent to SM culture, Preston chose, problematically, to invoke Orientalist tropes of perversion and decadence. By displacing nonconsensual slavery onto non-Western spaces, marking such illegal activities as necessarily foreign and Other, evidence of an antiquated and premodern society—gay leather culture in the U.S. becomes symbolic of pleasure in a democratic and sexually liberated society, a country where black men are free to dominate white men in recuperative racial play and where a man can willingly choose to become, at least for a while, another man’s slave. Indeed the mystery subplot, which attempts to definitively cut the association between SM and historical slavery through an unapologetic parody of anti-SM sentiment, unfortunately functions at the expense of those who have been consistently—and in today’s world more frequently and virulently—excluded from the American national imaginary.



Despite the racial diversity of the characters within these texts, each has its shortcomings—like Preston’s equation of perversion with foreign Otherness and his use of Orientalist language; Califia’s inclusion of racial diversity without exploring how such differences and intersectional identities might impact the dynamics of the group sex scene; and Queen’s over-reliance on stereotypes of black masculinity and sexuality, while paradoxically attempting to de-eroticize racial difference. Such tendencies in *The Leather Daddy and the Femme* align it with the many SM texts that strongly attempt to eschew, through a vociferous denial, the potential implications of cross-racial SM dynamics.

Given Queen's identity as a white woman, it's reasonable to presume that the choices she made in representing a sticky erotic scenario—in which the power dynamics in play appear to reflect hegemonic social hierarchies—belie a desire to sidestep the discomfort (and politics) that such a representation might evoke.

Though complicated by problematic engagements with race, these texts, in particular *Mr. Benson*, significantly revise previous academic theorizations of SM, in addition to shifting contemporary constructions of the queer literary canon. By establishing SM pornography as a vehicle for queer futurity, *Mr. Benson* reveals SM pornography as an overlooked site of queer theory and knowledge production, one that has proven highly influential amongst both sexual subcultures and the literatures produced by these communities. *Mr. Benson's* influence crossed lines of gender and sexuality, with an abundance of references to the text by lesbian and queer SM authors, who adapted and built on the subcultural rituals represented in Preston's novel. Unlike either postmodern representations of sadomasochistic sex or earlier SM pornography that plays with violence, Preston's firm resistance to eroticizing violence broadened the appeal and accessibility of SM culture by fusing well-written pornographic scenes with the excitement of a mystery novel and the pleasures of queered romance. In doing so, *Mr. Benson* participated in a mode of queer world-making that resisted hetero- and homonormative understandings of intimacy and intersubjective relations. Such contributions, which can also be seen in the fiction of Califia and Queen, not only demonstrate the significance of this understudied genealogy of queer literary history, but they also speak to the ways in which SM itself contributes to the process of queer world-making.

Unlike the practitioner-produced SM educational texts, Preston's fiction—which smuggled sex education into the pornographic genre—could reach a far-wider audience and a less self-selecting readership. Indeed, a casual reader is far more likely to pick up the hot porn book everyone is reading—if only to be in on the conversation and references within a community—than he or she might be to seek out and read a how-to SM text. Even Townsend observed that “someone who really isn't into [leather], I don't think he'd read” a more overtly instructional SM text like *The Leatherman's Handbook* (Townsend, “Interview” 7).

That these pornographic texts primarily focus on the specifics of sexual acts and the social formations that are created and necessitated by SM, reveals the limitations of scope found in contemporary queer theorizations of SM, which tend to analyze more stylized, avant-garde representations of sadomasochistic performances (as opposed to SM texts produced by and for leatherfolk). Returning to this understudied genealogy of SM literature problematizes queer theorists' consistent reliance on psychoanalytic methodologies, which limit theorizations of SM to its abstract internal effects in such a way as to obfuscate practitioner-produced SM theory and its more positive valences. The texts studied here—with their emphasis on education, on the creation of new modes of intersubjective relations, and on the expansion of subcultural sexual communities—reveal a theory of SM that is rooted in SM's embodied effects and pleasures. And it is SM's positive-productive potential that I take up in the following chapter, which explores the relevance of this theory of SM in historical terms.

Chapter 3. Evidence in the Archives

As noted in my Introduction, my research on lesbian and gay community development since WWII explores how SM has historically functioned as a communitarian force full of positive and productive potential. Moving beyond the literary-pornographic focus of the last chapter, here I explore SM's transformative effects on queer relationality, demonstrating how queer SM texts have had significant effects on embodied experience. In part, this project is a response to the fact that most SM scholarship "is interested in it as either an abstract problematic or an individualized orientation" and "very little work focuses on SM as a community" (Weiss 12). My own project studies SM in relation to community, but moves beyond Weiss's focus on contemporary pansexual BDSM in the San Francisco Bay Area. This more expansive study of queer leather cultural histories investigates the relation between embodied experience and the four tenets of SM's queer world-making potential established through my study of practitioner-produced pornography—queer relationality, community formation, erotic education, and the pursuit of fantasy.

In exploring the material effects of practitioner-produced SM texts, this chapter focuses on texts that have been framed in pragmatic terms, ones that are meant to intervene in the material world. I begin with Larry Townsend's *The Leatherman's*

Handbook (1972), which marked “the beginning of a pop culture genre: how-to and self-improvement books for leather players” (Fritscher 201). One of the most influential texts in gay leather culture, the *Handbook* gave rise to a proliferation of subsequent mixed-genre texts produced by and for various communities within queer leather subculture, such as Samois’s 1979 booklet, entitled *What Color is Your Handkerchief: A Lesbian S/M Sexuality Reader*, which was “the first major publication to defend lesbian s/m” (Khan 92), and Samois’s second and more widely circulated anthology, *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M* (1981). Analysis of Samois’s publications will also be supplemented with references to *The Lesbian S/M Safety Manual* (1988) edited by Califia, which, of the three SM lesbian texts discussed in this chapter, is the most explicitly instructive. As an introduction to leather for the uninitiated, Townsend’s text moves beyond technical “how-to” knowledge by including discussions of SM’s history, SM literature, and contemporary SM social-sexual practices, a blend of material that establishes the basic components of this genre.

Although technically a single-authored text, Townsend extensively researched the *Handbook* through conversations with fellow leathersmen, asking not only their advice on various topics but soliciting real-life anecdotes as well, which were incorporated as illustrative examples. In contrast to the *Handbook*, Samois’s texts were overtly collaborative projects that solicited material from women nationwide, including a mix of erotica, memoir/personal essay, theory, and articles, as well as visual imagery and poetry. Although varied in terms of authorship, audience, and content, these mixed-genre SM texts form a distinct literary heritage that effected change in the real world and in doing so they constitute a mode of queer world-making that might—to borrow a phrase from

Muñoz—function as “a blueprint for alternative modes of being in the world” (*Cruising Utopia* 172). By “mixed-genre” I am referring to how these texts blend SM theory, instructional “how-to” material, cultural commentary, and even ethnographic observation with pornography and “real-life” erotic anecdotes.

Despite their differences, these texts are unified in multiple ways. First, the erotic material is of value beyond its prurience since these narratives establish models of specific SM scenarios (both social and sexual). Second, this modeling of specific scenarios through erotic narrative, along with the critical essays and self-writing in these texts, alters the scope of the possible by allowing readers to imagine a queerer future. And finally, these qualities engender what I describe as the ecstatic pleasure of identification, a term that refers to the shock, surprise, and pleasure that accompanies the realization that one is not alone in desiring SM. Although immense pleasure already inheres in psychoanalytic understandings of “identification,” as Diana Fuss observes, “identifications are the source of some of our most powerful, enduring, and deeply felt pleasures” (2), I have added “ecstatic” as a way of linking identification with the utopic potentiality Muñoz theorizes. For Muñoz, ecstasy signals both a “consciousness that is not self-enclosed, particularly in regard to being conscious of the other” and a way to comprehend “temporal unity, which includes the past (having-been), the future (the not-yet), and the present (the making-present)” (*Cruising* 186). This realization that one is not alone and that whole communities of people with shared interests exist becomes the basis from which SM communities develop (in the case of lesbians) or expand (in the case of gay men). Thus, the ecstatic pleasure of identification can be read as a productive and

future-oriented process through which readers are de-isolated in both abstract and material terms.

Understanding mixed-genre texts' relation to embodied experience and queer futurity necessarily begins with how these texts help constitute a shared subcultural narrative that would form the basis for SM communities nationwide. In creating a shared subcultural narrative, these texts replaced medicalized understandings of sadomasochistic desire with new, positive scripts that emphasize pleasure. By attributing any negative affect associated with SM—guilt, fear, shame, or repression—to cultural forces and rejecting medical discourses and hegemonic narratives about SM that rely on psychoanalytic understandings, these mixed-genre texts allow individuals to realize that “people who have different sexual preferences are not sick, stupid, warped, brainwashed, under duress, dupes of the patriarchy, products of bourgeois decadence, or refugees from bad child-rearing practices. The habit of explaining away sexual variation by putting it down needs to be broken” (Rubin, *Coming to Power* [CTP] 223). Indeed, both Townsend's and Samois's texts repeatedly critique prevailing cultural narratives about SM.⁹⁹ For instance, Townsend cautions readers against medicalized notions of SM:

⁹⁹ A corresponding rejection of psychoanalytic narratives also began in the early 1970s amongst activist organizations, like the New York-based organization TES. TES enabled “a more positive self-understanding to SM people . . . [by] counter[ing] misconceptions about sadomasochism” (Rubin and Mesli, *Ashgate* 293). TES accomplished this by borrowing “from the women's movement, consciousness-raising groups [which] allowed members to come to their own definition of SM,” and in doing so, “TES developed a discourse that redefined SM in terms of its practitioners rather than those of psychiatry” (Rubin and Mesli, *Ashgate* 293). It is worth noting that Townsend's text would have been initially more influential in the early 70s when the effects of TES's consciousness-raising groups and their rejection of pathologizing discourses were likely limited to local members in the New York area. The reach of TES's activities would become far more widespread with the publication of their official position statement “The Eulenspiegel Society's Creed” in 1973; however TES's “unofficial position paper,” Terry Kolb's “Masochist's Lib,” was published in the *Voice* in May 1971 (Rubin and Mesli, *Ashgate* 294), and reprinted in *What Color is Your Handkerchief* (1979).

If the opinion of these ‘professional’ mind-snoops [i.e. psychiatrists] is all that’s holding you back . . . I would remind you that nearly all of our everyday wishes and desires—strong and important, or secondary to insignificant—are based in the same morass of subconscious, sometimes neurotic requirements. They don’t seem to disturb anyone when they are asexual in nature. . . . Neither do we cry ‘Perverse!’ when a man climbs a mountain or embarks on some other form of dangerous physical adventure. What makes a sexual adventure so different? (*Handbook* 25-26)

Similarly, Barbara Lipschutz observes in her contribution to *What Color*, “S-M is like homosexuality, in that those bothered by it find it necessary to find out what caused it” (*What Color* 9). In critiquing hegemonic discourses that stigmatize SM and constructing SM simply as a matter of preference, these texts model what Rubin would later come to call the concept of “benign sexual variation” (“Thinking Sex” 283).

That the genre-blending tendencies of Townsend’s *Handbook* and subsequent mixed-genre texts situate these works at the intersection between self-narrative and subcultural narrative further explains their relation to embodied experience. By “self-narrative” I am referring to both Foucault’s theorization of self-writing as a technique of self and to how autobiographical writing more generally becomes the “discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves day in and day out” effectively “structur[ing] our living” (Eakin, “What Are We Reading” 122). By “subcultural narrative” I am using the term “narrative” in a larger sense as a way of referring to the narratives that are both reflective and constitutive of SM subculture; such

narratives give individuals a sense of belonging to a larger community with a shared discourse. By studying these diverse texts in conjunction with their associated archives—namely the archives of Samois and of Townsend—I push the theorization of SM as a positive and productive force beyond the realm of literary fiction and demonstrate its relevance not only to a broader array of text types, but to embodied experience as well.

This exploration expands our understanding of how “for queers . . . sexual culture is a principal mode of sociability and public world making” (Warner, *The Trouble With Normal* 217). In the case of SM these modes of sociability and public world making are largely dependent on the written word. In revealing how this genealogy of SM literature is simultaneously reflective and productive of queer embodied experience, the juxtaposition of mixed-genre texts with their associated archival materials uncovers a fascinating and understudied aspect of SM: that SM identity and practice are uniquely reliant on narrative. Linking SM’s queer world-making potential with narrative practice relies on demonstrating the relationship between embodiment, textuality, narrative construction, identity, and community formation—a task that borrows from Foucauldian “techniques of self,” as well as the narrative turn in a variety of disciplines.¹⁰⁰ My methodology draws from cross-disciplinary work on narrative in order to establish the significance of this claim beyond the aesthetic realm and thus demonstrate how a positive-productive understanding of SM is relevant both in terms of textual and embodied practices. In contrast, my final chapter will return to SM in the aesthetic realm

¹⁰⁰ The narrative turn describes how, since the early 1980s, the study of narrative has expanded beyond its focus on literary texts to encompass “examinations of narrative as much in nontextual as in textual forms, as it related not only to cultural products but also to communication theory, pedagogy, sociology, cognition, therapy, memory, jurisprudence, politics, language acquisition, and artificial intelligence” and “more recently . . . encompassing a broader range of disciplinary forms of storied information—public policy analysis, medical diagnosis and education, and social work” (Kreiwirth 296-97).

through a study of canonical fiction in which postmodernist and queer narrative theory will be of more relevance.

Mixed-genre texts provide the sexual and social scripts that enable readers to not only experience the ecstatic pleasure of identification, but also to act on it by pursuing embodied SM experience and even joining or forming communities. More specifically, mixed-genre texts circulate narratives about SM pleasure and the means to achieve it; in turn, these narratives serve as models for subcultural scripts that get picked up, enacted, and circulated by readers. The circulation and individuation of these scripts all across the country expands and reinforces the larger narratives about SM communities' sense of self—so much so that this feedback loop between narrative production, circulation, and embodied practice ultimately stabilizes SM narratives into a recognizable and coherent subculture and identity.

The idea that culture shapes both human life and mind by imposing “the patterns inherent in the culture’s symbolic systems—its language and discourse modes, the forms of logical and narrative explication, and the patterns of mutually dependent communal life” (Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* 34), further clarifies how mixed-genre texts become so important to embodied queer experience. At the most basic level, the knowledge that particular subcultural narratives even exist is a prerequisite for articulating one’s own life narrative and identity in terms of that subculture. Indeed, we find this in one letter¹⁰¹ to

¹⁰¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all citations of letters come from the Samois or Larry Townsend archival material at The Center for Sex and Culture. N.B. The boxes containing Samois’s organizational records and correspondence at the CSC are actually a part of the Patrick Califia collection housed there. Since my research to date has exclusively focused on the Samois material from Califia’s archive, I have chosen, for the sake of clarity, to refer to this material as “CSC Samois.” Due to privacy concerns, I was asked by the archivist to redact the names of individual readers who wrote to Townsend or Samois. Since neither Califia’s nor Townsend’s archive contain any sort of pagination, my parenthetical citations will indicate

Townsend that expresses the ecstatic pleasure of identification—the feeling of being “amazed and confused to observe that my most private fantasies have also been created by others,” the astonishment of finding “in others so many similarities when I believed for such a long time that I was the only queer in the whole world” (CSC Townsend, “October 18, 1983” 2).¹⁰² Indeed, one’s ability to join any community or subculture relies on access to and knowledge of its discourse—its bank of stories, its scripts, and its wealth of knowledge—which was made possible through mixed-genre texts. Taken together, the knowledges circulated by and the ecstatic pleasures of identification enabled by mixed-genre texts establish the necessary conditions to effect changes in queer relationality.

However, the ecstatic pleasure of identification remains insufficient for effecting embodied changes if it remains an entirely private matter; as Jerome Bruner observes, “we live publicly by public meanings and by shared procedures of interpretation and negotiation” (*Acts of Meaning* 13). In this sense, circulating one’s own SM self-discovery narrative either through publication or correspondence (as seen in the mixed-genre texts or archival letters, respectively) becomes necessary for the achievement of SM pleasures. By SM self-discovery narrative, I am referring to narratives that trace the development of SM desire in an individual, identify what aspects of culture were most influential in this development, and often include erotic anecdotes about early SM experiences. Though such narratives might include information about coming out on SM, it is not their primary focus.

whether the letter is from Samois’s or Townsend’s archive (“CSC Samois” or “CSC Townsend”), the date of the letter, and the page number internal to that letter. When no date is given, I will title the letter according to how it is addressed and a snippet of the first line. Where applicable, I will indicate in a footnote the name of the folder from which the letter comes.

¹⁰² “Techniques and Specialties”

That a great deal of these narratives assimilate and reiterate the subcultural scripts that were being established through the circulation of mixed-genre texts further suggests how SM narratives incite more narrative. In particular, the letters from the archives enact a Foucauldian technique of self in which individuals use narrative as a mode of constituting an identity that is oriented around sexual practices, as opposed to object choice. By re-articulating and modifying the narratives found in mixed-genre texts, Townsend's and Samois's readers were using self-writing as a way to constitute their SM identity, enacting a technique of self in which "by transcribing his readings, [the reader] has appropriated them and made their truth his own: writing transforms the thing seen or heard 'into tissue and blood' (*in vires et in sanguine*)" (Foucault, "Self Writing" 213). Indeed, the archival letters demonstrate how SM identity is constituted when a reader records, modifies, and redeploys newfound knowledge, or in the words of Foucault, to "capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self" ("Self Writing" 211).

In part, the archival letters' tendency to echo the content of the mixed-genre texts indicates how individuals use narrative for a very significant social function: "communion with others," which Ochs and Capps identify as "the greatest potentiality of narrative" (31). In other words, by assimilating these texts' content into their own letters, readers participate in the production of a collective identity nationwide, which suggests how the SM narratives found in mixed-genre texts shape queer relationality in new ways. That narrative "accruals eventually create something variously called a 'culture' or a 'history' or, more loosely, a 'tradition'" (Bruner, "Narrative Construction of Reality" 18) and that narrative can be used to "forge a collective identity" (Ochs and Capps 31),

explains how self-writing relates more broadly to cultural formations. Thus, the letters sent to Townsend and Samois reveal the significance of narrative to SM practice and more specifically the dialogic nature of identity, community, and subcultural formation for SM practitioners.

The archives are significant for my analysis of the mixed-genre texts for three reasons. First, the letters provide evidence of the mixed-genre texts' impact on the formation of community and the materialization of embodied SM pleasure. This is particularly apparent in the extent to which the letters express how these texts expanded readers' understandings of themselves, of sexuality, and of what is possible in terms of community/pleasure/relationality—an effect that calls to mind pornographic texts' eroticization of knowledge discussed in the previous chapter. Second, the archives provide evidence for how SM narratives produce more narrative through letters that replicate, reiterate, and add to the narratives found in the mixed-genre texts, a process that reveals how the letters enact a type of self writing in which “the writer constitutes his own identity through this recollection of things said” (Foucault, “Self Writing” 213). Taken together, these two points reveal the essential narrativity that underlies SM, in terms of pleasure and identity; namely, the archival evidence suggests how SM narratives allow individuals to reconsider their relationship to their bodies, their sexual activities, and their identities, which gives rise to the pursuit of embodied SM pleasure and the formation of communities to support this pursuit.

These texts' circulation and further development of a wealth of sexual and social knowledge that had previously been kept secret, underlies the relation between SM's positive-productive potential and narrative activity, so much so that we might expand the

four tenets of positive-productive SM—queer relationality, community formation, erotic education, and pursuit of fantasy—to include narrative activity as well. Or, more accurately, we might say that the four tenets of SM as a queer world-making practice are fundamentally reliant on SM’s narrativity. Exploring this process of narrative production, text circulation, reader identification, and SM community development not only accentuates SM’s inherently narrative qualities, but it uncovers a new understanding of SM’s cultural history and its impact on queer experiences over the last half-century.

TOWNSEND AND COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION

Although William Carney began the process of “codify[ing] how-to-do and how-to-live the leather lifestyle” in his novel *The Real Thing* (1968) (Fritscher 195), Townsend’s *Handbook*, with its wider circulation, both reflected and effected a paradigm shift in gay leather culture; recall my Introduction’s discussion of changes in the way leathermen produced and transmitted social-sexual knowledges. The *Handbook* has proven widely influential not only for gay male leather culture but also for the “many women as well as many other-than-gay men, [who] have quoted Townsend’s *Handbook* as a leather primer, a clarificatory introduction into their own legitimate versions of leather culture” (Fritscher 199). For Townsend, the interpersonal transmission of knowledge from established community members remains the ideal model for learning about SM; yet, at the same time, the *Handbook*’s publication and its widespread positive reception began the process of dismantling the exclusionary nature of early leather

practices, like those outlined in the Introduction.¹⁰³ Where earlier texts, like Carney's, provide illustrative examples of the older apprenticeship system that Townsend incorporated into both his textual form and content, Carney's dogmatic approach to protocol "in most practical situations . . . simply does not apply—largely because there are too few partners who are willing to follow the rules. A guy's eager, trembling testicles will inevitably prevent his abiding by the purist's standards" (Townsend, *Handbook* 15). In contrast to Carney's work, the *Handbook* presents a theory of leathersex and leather protocol not as unimpeachable law, but rather as the creative basis for a practice which has all the room in the world for imagination and modification by potential/current practitioners.

The *Handbook* inspired "instant commercial imitation" (Fritscher 201) right at a historical moment when leather culture became far more publicly accessible. In part, the *Handbook's* role in the subcultural shift from "orality to literacy" can also be linked with how such cultural shifts effect generic changes that can result in "the surface structure of texts begin[ing] to evolve in different ways" (Fludernik, "Genres, Text Types" 284), as evidenced by the differences between earlier gay leather texts and those that followed the *Handbook*. The generic shift can be seen in the transition from Carney's novel, a fictionalized epistolary exchange in which an uncle educates his nephew in the culture and practices of gay leathermen, to Townsend's more consciously pedagogical "how-to" *Handbook*, which blends social history, literary history, cultural analysis, and

¹⁰³ Responding to what Jack Rinella refers to as "the criticism that *The Leatherman's Handbook* ruined the leather scene . . . by taking away the mystique of it and making it accessible to every leather twinkie in the world" (Townsend, "Interview" 6-7), Townsend replies that "most of the leather twinkies probably didn't bother reading it. . . . Someone who read the handbook [sic] from cover to cover . . . was interested in what was going on. . . . Someone who really isn't into it, I don't think he'd read it" (Townsend, "Interview" 7).

pornographic anecdotes, with practical advice ranging from role selection and finding a partner, to bar culture, motorcycles, and even castration.

Townsend's descriptions and guidelines about the leather community, bar culture, and social etiquette, his list of potential leather bars and tips about finding leather action in smaller cities—such as wearing “a few clues to identify himself and hang[ing] around the bus station bar . . . [or] largest downtown hustler bar” and his advice that “it might create less unwanted attention if your leather apparel were restricted to belt and boots, over a pair of faded jeans . . . maybe with a bunch of keys dangling from the appropriate side” (*Handbook* 104-5)—make the pursuit of embodied SM experience both possible and safe. In this sense, the *Handbook* is a pragmatic text meant to intervene in the exterior world: it produces an informed readership in more overt ways than the pornographic texts discussed in the previous chapter, and in doing so, it enables the realization of embodied SM pleasures. Again and again, Townsend encourages the reader to seek out that type of in-person instructional experience, since, “as a beginner, you must literally ‘start at the bottom’, [sic] find an experienced leatherman and learn the ropes from him. . . . If a guy's first partner—first S—is skillful and patient he can open a tremendous vista for his disciple” (*Handbook* 16).

For the uninitiated nationwide, Townsend and his *Handbook* became that first patient and skillful partner he implores readers to seek out. In this sense, the *Handbook* facilitates a queerer future with “better relations within the social that include better sex and more pleasure” (Muñoz, *Cruising* 30). In much the same way that each one-on-one apprenticeship with an experienced leatherman would be unique, reflective of that particular individual's tastes, experiences, and knowledge, Townsend frequently

emphasizes how the content in the *Handbook* should not be taken as a universal truth, since it is largely reflective of Townsend's own experiences and those in his circle. For example, Townsend explains his frequent use of the phrase "in my opinion" since he feels "it is very important not to deflate someone else's bag" on topics that are primarily a matter of taste or preference. To clarify how opinions should be taken as a benign reflection of personal preference Townsend uses a non-sexual metaphor: "I don't happen to like vanilla ice cream, but it is not for me to tell someone else he won't enjoy it. It is a matter of taste, and the way a thing tastes is sometimes difficult to describe. In an attempt to overcome this hurdle, I have included a number of vignettes to depict the particular action I am discussing. If some of these grab you, even just a little, I will have enabled you to sample the flavor" (*Handbook* 2). That Townsend's metaphor is likely the source of the contemporary term "vanilla sex,"¹⁰⁴ which has come to refer to sexual practices that do not involve SM or, more broadly, that do not involve some form of kink or fetish, further underscores his wide-reaching influence on SM subculture.

Despite the fact that his text created new ways of accessing SM knowledge, the *Handbook* does not endorse a complete transition from oral to written culture. Townsend frequently emphasizes the underlying importance of community education and the symbiotic relation between textual and embodied experiences; neither can replace the other. For example, in the opening chapter, "Why Leathersex," Townsend cautions the beginning leatherman to "enjoy what literature you will, but your training will come

¹⁰⁴ The figure of speech "plain vanilla," to indicate that which is bland or boring, was in use well before 1972, though it was not until the 1970s that this phrase took on a sexual connotation. According to Lynda Hart, "it seems quite likely that the term began in the gay leather community, since Townsend uses it here as vanilla ice cream (my inference being that had it been current at the time he would simply have said 'vanilla,' *not* that Townsend was the originator of the term)" (221).

entirely through experience. Never confuse the two. What you read is somebody else's fantasy¹⁰⁵—at best his idea of how the scene should work. What *you* do is *your* only reality" (16). In doing so, Townsend uses a textual medium in an attempt to preserve the centrality of oral and embodied experience to SM. In this sense, we might liken the text's pragmatic intention to affect exterior reality with how narrative enables one to "pole vault beyond the presently expectable" (Bruner, "Narrative, Culture, and Mind" 45). Like the future-oriented temporality of SM discussed in the previous chapter—where pornographic fantasy enables readers to imagine a queerer future—Townsend's mixed-genre text works even more overtly in the service of queer futurity and queer world-making. In the previous chapter I distinguished a "social-sexual fantasy"—a vision of a queerer future—from an "individual sexual fantasy"—the desire to realize a specific SM scenario in a single discrete scene (i.e. the realization of embodied SM pleasure); likewise, a corresponding relation between fantasy and reality can also be found in mixed-genre texts like Townsend's. Through the textual transmission of knowledge and the text's incitement of readers' arousal, the *Handbook* allows (and encourages through the mechanism of desire) a reader to imagine the future otherwise and work towards its realization.

Both Townsend's influence on subsequent texts and the ways in which the *Handbook* made access to leather knowledge possible were enabled by a wealth of knowledge that had accumulated and been preserved through oral culture, as noted in my

¹⁰⁵ However, using archival letters to understand the impact of the fantasies encountered in mixed-genre texts like Townsend's complicates this assertion. By reading, assimilating, and claiming as one's own the fantasies found in texts, it is clear that such techniques of self enabled leathermen to read and integrate others' fantasies into their own repository of sexual scripts. In doing so, a reader's fantasy and their desired (and thus potential future) reality become shaped by what has been read.

Introduction. In 1971, when Greenleaf Classics, the publisher of Townsend's previous fiction, suggested he write an exposé on gay leather culture, Townsend countered by suggesting a guidebook, since an exposé on the gay leather scene "would be an act of treachery to my friends" (Townsend, "Interview" 6). While writing the *Handbook*, Townsend solicited a great deal of material from those more experienced in gay leather culture. At just 31 years old, Townsend "wasn't really old enough to be a sage" of leather culture when he began writing the *Handbook*, so he "contacted a few guys who were these kind of network people and I told them what I was going to do and I talked to them and there was a lot of discussion about this and I would write a chapter or two and then I would show it to them and they would say 'you didn't remember this' and that kind of thing. I had a lot of guidance with it, a lot of help" (Townsend, "Interview" 6). By "network people" Townsend is referring to early leather culture's networking system: prior to subscription-based correspondence lists, there were men who served as "cornerstones" of "the S&M community in various locations around the world, at least around the Western world, [so] that if you knew a guy who lived in your area, he could put you on to somebody in Chicago or somebody in London or somebody in New York if you were going to travel there—whether you wanted to have sex with the guy or not, that was sort of immaterial—but you had a contact within the S&M community" (Townsend, "Interview" 2). In many ways, Townsend's process of writing the *Handbook*—soliciting information from the community, organizing this information in narrative form, and seeking feedback from the community on chapter drafts—enacts the shift from oral to written culture within SM communities that occurred during the same time period. As noted in my Introduction, texts like Townsend's made leather knowledge widely

available, which in turn shifted the center of leather culture away from these informal, secretive networks.

Moreover, the *Handbook* itself essentially translates into written form the experience of one-on-one apprenticeship associated with early leather culture. The *Handbook*'s rhetorical "format of doing the explanations and maybe putting in a little vignette here and there, give you a chance to jack off before you got to the next subject" (Townsend, "Interview" 7), could be said to replicate, to the degree that a textual form can, the embodied experience of SM knowledge acquisition associated with the older, oral tradition, as when a backroom conversation between two men discussing a specific type of scene or aspect of SM culminates in its enactment, or a hands-on, instructive experience, in which the apprentice might be "a partner in the action or be deputized to perform certain minor functions only. . . . Accomplish your task no matter how small, cheerfully and intelligently so that you will make a good impression on those who have their eye on you" and you will be included in future scenes (Carney, *The Real Thing* 118). These examples of embodied practices in early leather culture couple instruction with arousal that culminates in sexual gratification; similarly, Townsend invites his reader to learn from their embodied response to his book.

Townsend further links the illustrative and instructive potential of his anecdotes to embodied experience and the development of community by telling the reader how their arousal should act as a kind of personal litmus test to help them assess desire and gain a clearer understanding of their preferences. The ability of narratively inspired embodied arousal to increase one's sexual self-knowledge, which underlies the pursuit of future embodied pleasure, further speaks to such narratives' relationship to queer futurity and

world-making. In some senses, this link between text and embodied experience echoes that discussed in Chapter Two. There I argued that SM fiction enabled readers to use the individual sexual fantasy narratives of pornography to explore untested desires.

Townsend repeats his incitement to arousal at the end of the *Handbook* when he writes “Try it, baby! . . . If your cock is prodding your jeans right now, or if it has been poking down your leg while you read these pages, you’re ripe for your first plunge. And believe me, the water’s fine!” (*Handbook* 305). That this final command to arousal follows the results of Townsend’s extensive leather questionnaire and precedes the two appendices—one on bars/restaurants/baths and one on specialty leather and toy suppliers—further reinforces the link between textual narrative and embodied experience that underlies the entire book.¹⁰⁶

The *Handbook* further contributes to the creation of leather culture through the historicizing work performed by the introduction in which Townsend narrates a history of gay leather culture by situating leathersmen’s practices in a centuries-long tradition of textual and embodied practices. By identifying a long history of male same-sex sadomasochistic eroticism (even when it has not been named as such) that stretches back to Greek and Roman times—from Spartans and their slaves to “a broken pot or dilapidated wall painting which depicts a captive warrior in sexual subservience” or a period when “slave markets flourished all over the Mediterranean area” (*Handbook* 6-7)—Townsend produces a shared cultural inheritance. By describing the “many ancients

¹⁰⁶ The leather questionnaire, called “The Leather Fact Sheet,” takes up twenty pages of Townsend’s text. It includes a detailed checklist that can be used as a tool for gauging one’s and one’s potential partners’ interests. Townsend circulated the list prior to publishing the *Handbook* so that he could provide some—albeit limited—statistical information about leathersmen, including statistics about race, preferred role, age, and specific fetishes. The results of the informal survey are included in the *Handbook* as a way to let readers know where they stand.

who practiced an earlier form of the art [of S&M] with whatever materials were available during their particular life spaces” (*Handbook* 6), Townsend shapes “our conceptions of the past” through stories that “are not exclusively hemmed in by the demands of *verifiability*” (Bruner, “Narrative, Culture, and Mind” 45).

Townsend’s historical narratives do not cite specific events or dates, but rather ask us to imagine historically likely scenarios, aspects of the past that he brings together under the broad theme of sadomasochistic pleasure. For example, Townsend suggests how “binding a captive on the battlefield and claiming him as one’s property—sexual or otherwise—was common enough in most early civilizations” (*Handbook* 6). Here, Townsend employs “storymaking . . . [as] an exquisite instrument for taking into account (even for justifying) ‘real’ life’s ambiguities” (Bruner, “Narrative, Culture, and Mind” 46), or perhaps, for justifying his liberal narrativization of historical ambiguities.

Significantly, these allusions to the ancient and universal nature of SM can be found in subsequent mixed-genre SM texts: we find an echo of Townsend’s reference to a broken pot or dilapidated wall painting in Joseph Bean’s assertion that “to write a comprehensive history of sadomasochism, it would have to begin in the undeciphered pictograms of our cave-dwelling ancestors . . . [T]here is no sexuality more deeply rooted—even biologically dependent upon—the giving and bearing of threatening and/or painful stimulation than that of the older (and lower?) animals” (*Leathersex* 191). We find another echo of Townsend in the historical analogues identified by Geoff Mains in *Urban Aborigines* (1984), such as the Dionysian culture of classical Greece (175), “the cult of faerie (or witchcraft). This sub-culture was a survival of older Celtic cultures,” and the spirituality of “Gnostic Christianity [which] appeared in the first century A.D.” (176).

In addition to his narration of ancient histories overlaid with sadomasochistic impulses, Townsend cites the Spanish Inquisition, Nazi Germany, and other historically verifiable examples of violent power imbalances, while carefully pointing out that most “are the gross and evil examples recorded on the pages of history” (*Handbook* 8). To justify his inclusion of such fraught examples, Townsend narrativizes SM’s sublimated history by alluding to events, tendencies, and impulses for which we find only traces in the historical record. Townsend asks the reader to consider: “What of the average person who did not seek to violate another’s wishes, but who nonetheless had the desire to take or give a measure of symbolic punishment? They have also existed throughout history, but their exploits were only recorded when their actions were in public or came under the observation of some monastic scholar” (*Handbook* 8-9). Here, Townsend asks the reader to engage in narrative activity, in essence inviting his readers to co-produce the history of SM that was excluded from the historical record. In doing so, Townsend’s history of SM sexuality aligns with Foucault’s observation that the great majority of sexual discourse, particularly concerning non-normative tendencies, was recorded only when it became socially problematic enough for institutional attention (whether juridical, medical, or religious) (*History* 21, 33).

Townsend’s identification of sadomasochistic impulses across time also reflects the common rhetorical trope Foucault identified in “scandalous literature,” which often justifies its detailed accounts of myriad sexual practices through appeals to universality, as is the case with “the solitary author of *My Secret Life* [who] often says, in order to justify his describing them, that his strangest practices undoubtedly were shared by thousands of men on the surface of the earth” (Foucault, *History* 22). Townsend’s

historical work thus allows him to have his cake and eat it too: by citing real instances of sadomasochistic tendencies he can use historical evidence to support his claim for the long-standing universality of SM pleasure, while simultaneously distancing contemporary SM practice from the horrors of historically oppressive and violent power imbalances. This latter rhetorical move is accomplished by appealing to our sense of the limitations of recorded history.

Townsend also situates his own text within a broader literary history by offering a genealogy of SM-inflected literature, a common trait amongst subsequent mixed-genre texts, even while the lists of literature differ depending on audience. In Townsend, this instructive and/or pornographic literature ranges from the explicit material by the Marquis de Sade in the 18th century; through the subtextual SM homoeroticism of maritime literature, like Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840); to non-SM gay fiction that Townsend claims every leatherman he's talked to found arousing, like James Leo Herlihy's *Midnight Cowboy* (1965), John Rechy's *City of Night* (1963), and Jean Genet's *The Thief's Journal* (1949); to a list of explicitly gay leather fiction published in the late 1960s and early 70s after the collapse of legal barriers on censorship (as I discussed in the Introduction); and even the instructive potential of a modest technical text, like John R. Leahy and Pat Barrow's *Restraint of Animals* (1951), by a "poor, unsuspecting veterinarian" (*Handbook* 257). By linking modern gay leathermen with diverse literary and cultural histories, Townsend's narratives contribute to the production of queer history.

Though Townsend's text was immensely influential in terms of both content and structure on subsequent mixed-genre SM texts, Townsend's own stylistic and generic

choices appear to have themselves been influenced by more popular literary movements of the time; “like New Journalist Hunter Thompson . . . journalist-player Larry Townsend, the right reporter in the right place at the right time . . . caught the wave of a movement co-created by quite a few players, writers, photographers, and entrepreneurs who themselves were and are active and deeply established S&M leather masters and slaves” (Fritscher 200). Indeed, the *Handbook*’s overarching structure—in which illustrative “real-life” (erotic) anecdotes are blended with instructional material and cultural commentary—riffs on the defining feature of New Journalism narratives in which authors make themselves and their experiences a central part of the narrative. Indeed, even Townsend’s emphasis on the relative nature of the information he presents, how it is colored by his personal preferences, calls to mind the ethos of New Journalism.

The influence of New Journalism on the *Handbook*’s structure is especially apparent in Townsend’s efforts to authenticate his material, which has the added effect of further linking his text to embodied experience. Throughout the *Handbook*, Townsend repeatedly states the source of an anecdote and the anecdote’s degree of reliability. For example, something he experienced first-hand is often preceded by a phrase like, “I remember a particularly attractive number whom I encountered at the *Falcon’s Lair*” (*Handbook* 100), which indicates that his personal experience is the source and provides geographic details to underscore its authenticity. Here, Townsend uses a form of self-writing to produce cultural knowledge from his personal experiences and those of his close associates. Townsend also differentiates amongst a first-hand account received from a trusted friend; a second-hand anecdote related to him by a trusted friend; or an anecdote Townsend received in the mail. For instance, some of his examples in the

chapter “S&M Without Bondage” are composed of quotations “from a couple of letters . . . these are good illustrations . . . although each is based primarily on fantasy. The first came to me attached to a ‘fan letter’ following the publication of my *Leather Ad*” novels (*Handbook* 70), while the second “was received in response to an ad I ran . . . seeking ‘a former enlisted man to reform the bad habits of an ex-Marine officer.’ . . . I have no way to verify or deny how much is imagination and how much may be based on fact. It doesn’t really matter, though; the key to the scene is fantasy” (*Handbook* 73).

Townsend also indicates when he is relating a more removed account, like a story that circulates in the community despite its questionable veracity. For instance, following an account of a non-consensual gangbang involving two undercover cops at a bathhouse, Townsend clarifies that “this is the story as related to me by two guys who claimed to have been present. Fantasy? I can’t honestly say. The attendant, however, could affirm that *something* had gone on. The cops *were* tied down, he told me” (*Handbook* 215); by inserting the story of his investigation into this anecdote’s framework, Townsend more overtly becomes a participatory New Journalist, à la Hunter S. Thompson. Interestingly, Townsend precedes one of the more extreme scenarios in the book, one detailing a group scene in which the M underwent temporary castration, by claiming “although I did not witness this myself, I have the report from two trusted observers . . . each of whom corroborated the other in every important detail” (*Handbook* 241).

When Townsend uses citation to authenticate the embedded erotic anecdotes around which the *Handbook* is structured, his rhetoric also becomes more reminiscent of scholarly writing than of fictional narratives. This rhetoric of legitimation differs significantly from how SM scenarios are modeled and represented within pornographic

(fantasy) texts, which—unlike the pragmatic texts analyzed here—are not compelled to source information or ideas responsibly, although they tend to do so, as I demonstrated in the last chapter when discussing Preston’s and Califia’s emphases on eroticizing safe sex practices in their fiction.

By using anecdotes received through correspondence, the *Handbook*’s structure further highlights the relation between mixed-genre texts and embodied experience, and by extension, the relation between SM practice and shared subcultural narratives. The importance of networks of leathermen circulating knowledge and narrative through correspondence (and in doing so contributing to a shared cultural heritage) is highlighted by a letter in Townsend’s archive from a Marine in 1972, who mentions how he’s “been corresponding . . . with a Leather-stud in Massachusetts, and not only did he recommend your book to me, but he said that you have included his letter about wild bike-sex on the Mystic River Bridge in it!” (CSC Townsend, “June 15, 1972” 1).¹⁰⁷ This letter underscores how SM communities, identities, and pleasures came to be increasingly dependent on narrative, while suggesting how the influential texts that publicized a shared subculture narrative for leathermen were themselves dependent on erotic self-writing.

While the *Handbook* emphasizes the importance of a hands-on approach to knowledge acquisition and the significant value of decades worth of cultural knowledge that gay leather men had accrued by 1971, Townsend presents the *Handbook* as the only legitimate repository of this shared knowledge. He cautions readers against what little SM literature is currently available since, in most cases, writers and publishers motivated

¹⁰⁷ “Fan Requests”

by money “could care less how far from the truth their material may be . . . I know of several books written by old ladies. I don’t mean elderly queens, but real, gray-haired, sweet-looking, wrinkled grandmother types whose closest experience with S&M was when they took a razor strop to Junior” (*Handbook* 15). By advising his readers “most strongly not to believe most of what you read” (*Handbook* 15), Townsend’s book becomes the only valuable alternative to the oral/one-on-one apprenticeship tradition that defined earlier leather culture. And at the time of its publication in 1972, this was true. However, by making this knowledge widely available to a broader (queer) public, the publication of the *Handbook* significantly altered the literary landscape—as the proliferation of subsequent gay and then lesbian SM mixed-genre texts demonstrates.

SAMOIS AND COMMUNITY FORMATION

To the degree that narratives “shape our ways of communicating with each other and our ways of experiencing the world . . . [to] give form to what we imagine, to our sense of what is possible” (Bruner, “Narrative, Culture, and Mind” 45), Samois’s texts can be said to have produced a collective culture and effectively created a queerer future through the circulation of SM narratives. As Califia and Sweeney reflect in the introduction to *The Second Coming*, even after Samois folded “it left behind a very important legacy that continues to do the group’s outreach, education, and support work. That legacy is *Coming to Power*. . . . The book went places a local support group never could have reached” (xii). In fact, *Coming to Power* was so influential that it created a generation gap between “the women who came into the S/M community before the publication of *Coming to Power* or before there were women’s S/M support groups” and

the women who came afterwards (Califia and Sweeney, *Second Coming* xiii). As one lesbian, separatist witch writes to Samois in 1982, “‘Coming to Power’ has given me much needed support” and “I don’t know too many wimmin into S/M so I’ve often felt alone, sometimes scared, and sometimes questioning, hesitant—(is-there-something-wrong-with-me? type of feeling)” (CSC Samois, “Dear Wimmin of Samois—” 1).¹⁰⁸ By giving women the opportunity to identify with SM and by providing models for community action, *What Color is Your Handkerchief* and *Coming to Power* exemplify the relation between narrative and SM’s queer world-making potential.

What Color was primarily meant “to answer questions lesbians have about where S/M might fit into their lives. . . . [I]t is presented here to meet an immediate need for information and support. This need became obvious when more than 150 women attended an open educational meeting about lesbian S/M sponsored by Samois in early 1979” (*What Color*, “About This Publication”). Thus, more than erotica, *What Color*’s content included art, essays ranging from a personal SM coming out narrative (with erotic content), theorizations of SM that critique stereotypes, and pieces about SM political activism, as well as informative tools like an explanation about Samois as an organization, a lesbian glossary of SM terminology, the handkerchief code for lesbians, lists of resources for leather/rubber goods, and a literature guide. In addressing the basic needs of a nascent lesbian SM community, *What Color* made it possible for women to begin developing their own SM consciousness.

Samois’s second publication, *Coming to Power*, was more intentionally meant to “address contemporary issues of sexuality and s/m in the lesbian and feminist

¹⁰⁸ “Samois Correspondence, March 1982”

community, provide positive role models for s/m lesbians and offer space for graphics, fiction, critical essays, poetry and s/m erotica created by and for lesbian-feminists”

(*Lesbian Herstory Archives: Subject Files*, Samois, “Commentary December 1980”).¹⁰⁹

The types of narrative and rhetorical tendencies found in *What Color* are refined and expanded in *Coming to Power*. The contributions to *Coming to Power* tend to establish SM identity as that of an oppressed minority through the trope of the closet; take a Foucauldian pleasure in the status of a heroic outlaw defying authority (Khan 99-100); critique anti-SM feminist claims, while theorizing SM’s feminist politics; and present personal, cultural, and political histories of SM stigma and oppression. Taken together, these texts initiated the process of establishing a knowledge-base from which women could fantasize about and work to realize a queerer future.

While Townsend’s *Handbook* was a group effort, *What Color* and *Coming to Power* are overtly a product of a collective effort by the women of Samois, who brought together contributions from SM lesbians across the country. By the time Samois began gathering material for *Coming to Power*, their public information committee, the “Ministry of Truth”¹¹⁰—which was responsible for Samois’s publication efforts—had grown to seventeen women. Townsend’s text brought a rich oral history into the present, forever altering the shape of gay leather culture by granting access to leathermen’s history and shared knowledges. Townsend’s text made his experiences and those of his

¹⁰⁹ Folder 12610 “S&M,” Microfilm Reel 124: 31-32

¹¹⁰ Samois explains that taking the name from George Orwell’s 1984 novel is a “very serious joke” and that in contrast to Orwell’s Ministry of Truth, “in Samois, the first project of our Ministry of Truth was publishing the booklet, *What Color is Your Handkerchief?* Unlike Orwell’s vision, ours is to provide as much information as possible . . . so that others can decide for themselves where dominant/submissive exploration may or may not fit into their lives” (*Lesbian Herstory Archives: Subject Files*, Samois, “Commentary December 1980,” Folder 12610 “S&M,” Microfilm Reel 124: 31).

acquaintances along with their collected social/sexual/technical knowledge broadly available. However, the diversity of material and perspectives in Samois's texts effectively instantiated new genres of expression for SM lesbians, which became the basis for women to articulate, understand, and claim their SM identities, as reflected in the myriad SM self-discovery narratives in letters sent to Samois. Indeed, *Coming to Power* ushered an entire subculture—complete with social, sexual, political, and technical knowledges—into being, an achievement made possible by providing women not only with the technical know-how and the political arguments with which to defend themselves, but also with a plethora of individual sexual fantasies that made the realization of SM lesbian communities all the more enticing.

Moreover, unlike the *Handbook*, *Coming to Power*'s content was not limited by a circle of intimate acquaintances, but rather gathered material through a nationwide call for "the widest possible range of woman-identified experiences and perspectives" on SM (*Lesbian Herstory Archives: Subject Files*, Samois, "Summer 1980").¹¹¹ Positioned as an "expanded second edition" of *What Color*, *Coming to Power*'s call for submissions sought "short stories; fantasies; journal excerpts; poetry; graphics (drawings, cartoons, photographs); essays and/or autobiographical writing on such topics as: coming out, childhood experiences, dealing with your local women's/Lesbian community, having non s/m lovers, s/m 'vs' pornography and violence, s/m sex, differences/similarities between Lesbian and gay male s/m, Lesbian and heterosexual s/m; anything else you feel would be appropriate" (*Lesbian Herstory Archives: Subject Files*, Samois, "Summer 1980").¹¹²

¹¹¹ Folder 12610 "S&M," Microfilm Reel 124: 19

¹¹² Folder 12610 "S&M," Microfilm Reel 124: 19

The breadth of material solicited as well as the call for submissions' emphasis on fantasy material further distinguishes *Coming to Power* from earlier, male-oriented texts, particularly in terms of lesbian texts' relation to queer futurity and world-making. More specifically, *Coming to Power* leverages the projective function of narrative in the service of a queerer future, calling to mind the way in which fantasy functioned in the lesbian pornographic texts discussed in the previous chapter.

The relation to queer futurity suggested by *Coming to Power*'s fantasy material is especially apparent in a key difference between Townsend's and Samois's texts: Samois's texts lack the citational legitimation of erotic anecdotes that Townsend heavily emphasized in the *Handbook*. This difference can be partially accounted for by the fact that lesbian SM "did not really exist as a subculture until the late 1970s" (Rubin and Mesli, *Ashgate* 292). In other words, SM lesbians lacked the cultural infrastructure to support a well developed social-sexual world in which women could gain the same variety of experience as their gay male counterparts; indeed, "Linnea Due wrote that in the 1960s an SM world was 'about as attainable as waking up in the middle of the *Story of O*. That didn't stop me from trying—since age seventeen I'd been storming gay male leather bars and being tossed out on my ear more times than I wanted to remember . . .'" (Due 1998:9; qtd. in Rubin and Mesli, *Ashgate* 296). While Townsend was "a fellow working-journalist in the midst of an extraordinary tribe of leatherfolk featuring a convergence of hands-on and heads-up 'mediums' through whom leather homomascularity articulated its modern self" (Fritscher 196), the women who formed Samois did so in order to create their own sexual and social culture.

In this sense, the creation of a lesbian SM subculture relied even more heavily on the transmission and circulation of knowledge through texts. Indeed, “by the mid-1970s, several feminist newspapers had published pieces for, about, or against, SM . . . in part because increasing numbers of kinky women in lesbian and feminist communities were speaking publicly about SM” (Rubin and Mesli, *Ashgate* 296-7). As noted in the Introduction, these early feminist considerations of SM in the mid-1970s eventually grew and proliferated during the sex wars of the 1980s, when Samois’s texts became galvanizing forces in lesbian-feminist communities, serving both as positive models for queer social-sexual practices and as models of internalized oppression, depending upon one’s political perspective.

In both *What Color* and *Coming to Power*, community becomes fundamental to the pursuit of SM pleasure. This is particularly apparent in the number of contributions to both texts that center on the revelatory experience of finding like-minded SM women. For example, in “A Personal View of the History of the Lesbian S/M Community and Movement in San Francisco,” Califia recalls signing up for an SM seminar at a 1976 women’s health conference, only to discover that a group of women were taking down the names of those who signed up for a seminar on SM and health, and later warning other conference attendees about them (*CTP* 246). Despite these social ostracism tactics, Califia was pleasantly surprised to find other women in attendance and realized that “if a dozen women would put up with this much shit to come talk about [SM], surely I could find partners and friends. I wouldn’t be alone. That had been my greatest fear” (*CTP* 247). Furthermore, Califia recalls that in the mid-1970s after coming out about SM “I didn’t feel welcome or safe anywhere—on the streets or in lesbian bars; on public transit

or in the Women's Building" (CTP 250). Though much of the content is personal in nature, Califia also takes a self-reflexive view and situates these experiences within the context of the activist work, establishment of, and hurdles faced by Samois, as in the "pattern of censorship in our feminist publications" (CTP 267) and how the Women's Building revoked a space that Samois had reserved for a meeting for out of town SM lesbians prior to the 1981 Lesbian and Gay Freedom Day Parade (CTP 275).

Similarly, in "The Leather Menace," Rubin recalls how, when she "came out as a lesbian sadomasochist, there was no place to go," since "unlike gay men, lesbians have not yet developed more specialized sexual sub-groups" (CTP 222). Like "A Personal View," Rubin's contribution to *Coming to Power* presents a theory of SM, its politics, and its cultural practices by contextualizing her personal SM coming out narrative within the broader socio-historical moment. Rubin reflects on her experience in terms of shifting sexual attitudes toward sexuality in the U.S. and critiquing the anti-SM and anti-pornography rhetoric of the 1980s sex wars. "The Leather Menace" functions not only as a history of sexual repression in the U.S., but also as a platform for establishing SM lesbians as an oppressed minority. Rubin's narrativization of the history leading up to anti-SM feminism concludes with a lament about the energy wasted on internal strife in the feminist movement, time and energy that might be better spent theorizing the politics of sex since "these populations of erotic dissidents have a great deal to contribute to the reviving radical debate on sexuality" (CTP 227).

Both the politics and the pleasures of SM sexuality are central to the many SM self-discovery narratives in *Coming to Power* and *What Color*. Like the archival letters I will discuss in the following section, these narratives begin by articulating an initial

repression regarding SM desire, as Drivenwoman's piece from *What Color* does: "When I was eight years old I was masturbatory, lesbian and sadomasochistic. Subsequently, because of my feelings of guilt, I renounced all three. . . . I'm still in the closet on S-M. I have admitted that I *used* to be into it . . . and attributed the whole thing to what I call my 'lousy heterosexual instincts'" (*What Color* 12). In general, these SM self-discovery narratives go on to explain how the creation and subsequent pursuit of SM fantasy narratives enabled access to various forms of pleasure and community.

Drivenwoman's piece is no exception; she explains how fantasy narratives were integral to her nascent SM and lesbian identities. She begins by describing a relationship with her best female friend in third grade that revolved around "tie-up sex games" that began when Drivenwoman and her friend started "to act out stories from *True Confessions*" magazine (*What Color* 12).¹¹³ Soon, "we took to writing our own scenarios" and acting them out: "Basically the rules were this: one of us got to be the woman and the other got to write the script" (*What Color* 12). By utilizing scripts that "involved man and woman . . . men and woman[,] and occasionally monster and woman" (*What Color* 12), Drivenwoman and her friend explored and expressed their lesbian and SM desires by identifying with and queering culturally accepted story scripts.

Drivenwoman's story is accompanied by a post-script that explains how Samois received a follow-up letter from the author stating that she "had publicly come out as s-m in her community . . . [and] she received a lot of support from other radical lesbians in her community" (*What Color* 14). Writing "Coming Out on S-M" effectively enabled

¹¹³ It is interesting that Drivenwoman's budding SM lesbian desires were themselves inspired by the ostensibly true narratives in *True Confessions*, a magazine that has, since 1922, "been [a] survival guide for any woman that wants to feel like she's not alone in her trials and tribulations" (*TrueRenditionsLLC.com*, "About Us").

Drivenwoman to come out through narrative while initially maintaining her anonymity, while the post-script offers narrative closure and links her anonymous coming out through narrative with her subsequent act of coming out in her community. Where her childhood use of culturally accepted scripts allowed her to play with the pleasures of SM in relative safety, her anonymous contribution to *What Color* shows yet another way Drivenwoman used narrative to play with SM in relative safety. Together, Drivenwoman's narrative and its post-script demonstrate how narrative can be used "to cultivate both diversity and coherence among potential and actual selves" (Ochs and Capps 30), and how, in some senses, narrative lays the groundwork for the realization of potential selves. The narrative post-script and the fact that "Coming out on S-M" was published by a lesbian SM support group that did not exist at the time Drivenwoman initially wrote and published her narrative in 1976, cumulatively produce a publically available model of action for (closeted) SM lesbians.

The significant influence of Samois's texts on the creation of lesbian SM communities becomes even more astounding when considering the barriers Samois faced in circulating and advertising their published material. Material from the Lesbian Herstory Archives¹¹⁴ reveals how major forces in the lesbian and feminist communities—such as women's bookstore collectives and feminist magazines—consistently delayed, if not outright refused, to sell or print advertisements for *What Color* and *Coming to Power*. For example, on July 15, 1979, Samois sent a letter to the lesbian-feminist bookstore, A

¹¹⁴ Located in New York, the Lesbian Herstory Archives was founded in 1975 by Joan Nestle, Deborah Edel, Julia Stanley, Sahli Cavallaro, and Pamela Oline ("A Brief History"). The Lesbian Herstory Archives began with a consciousness-raising group that grew out of the Gay Academic Union ("A Brief History"). The first of its kind, this grassroots Lesbian archive has since become the world's oldest and largest repository of material by and about lesbians and lesbian communities.

Woman's Place,¹¹⁵ inquiring why *What Color* was being subjected to special "formal collective evaluation" (*Lesbian Herstory Archives: Subject Files*, Samois, "July 15, 1979, Letter to A Woman's Place")¹¹⁶ and urging the collective to "treat this pamphlet as you do other material published by, for, and about Lesbians — by making it available without prior censorship" (*Lesbian Herstory Archives: Subject Files*, Samois, "July 15, 1979, Letter to A Woman's Place").¹¹⁷ Much like *What Color* itself, Samois's letter emphasizes the paucity of lesbian SM material and the necessity of making such material accessible: "other than a couple of zeroxed [sic] articles offered by Samois at that meeting,¹¹⁸ there's been virtually no printed material available about Lesbians and s&m . . . and many of us have very much wished this were otherwise" (*Lesbian Herstory Archives: Subject Files*, Samois, "July 15, 1979, Letter to A Woman's Place").¹¹⁹ Sometimes, it took over a year for Samois to hear that an advertisement was delayed or cancelled, as indicated by a November 1981 letter from *Inciter* magazine regarding an as-yet-unpublished advertisement for *What Color*, "since we cannot agree among ourselves that because the book is about SM that that is enough reason to accept or reject it, we would like to be able to look at the book itself" (*Lesbian Herstory Archives: Subject Files, Inciter* magazine, "Letter to Samois officer, November 2, 1981").¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ So eager to have their pamphlet made available to women interested in SM, Samois even encouraged A Woman's Place to "put one of your index card 'disclaimers' below the shelf where it sits, noting that there's been dissention among you about the pamphlet's appropriateness, and asking for feedback" (*Lesbian Herstory Archives: Subject Files*, Folder 12610 "S&M," Microfilm Reel 124: 20, Samois, "July 15, 1979, Letter to A Woman's Place").

¹¹⁶ Folder 12610 "S&M," Microfilm Reel 124: 20

¹¹⁷ Folder 12610 "S&M," Microfilm Reel 124: 20

¹¹⁸ The letter refers to a presentation at the bookstore, Old Wives' Tales that drew more attendees than any other event hosted there.

¹¹⁹ Folder 12610 "S&M," Microfilm Reel 124: 20

¹²⁰ Folder 12610 "S&M," Microfilm Reel 124: 24

Critiques of Samois's texts came not only from prominent organs of lesbian culture, but from individuals as well. In a December 1981 letter to Samois, one woman writes that "groups like Samois are not merely frivolous, they are dangerous in that they divert precious resources from the struggle against imperialism" (CSC Samois, "12/81 For Internal Discussion:" 1),¹²¹ particularly since even though some lesbians enjoy SM "it does not follow that sado- masochists require a liberation movement. Where is the economic base for such a movement? . . . The gay liberation movement is a threat to capitalism in that it is a challenge to the nuclear family. Samois types do not hold the same claim to political validity as do lesbians and gay men" (CSC Samois, "12/81 For Internal Discussion:" 1). In a 1981 letter, a heterosexual feminist applauds *What Color's* work towards "liberating SM for lesbian women . . . [and] examining SM from a feminist perspective," but expresses dissatisfaction with the "anti-heterosexual bias" in Lipschutz's "Cathexis": "I had really hoped for more understanding of sexual preference than to be told (again!) that my sexuality was counter-revolutionary & how horror of horrors—'a perversion of masochism'" (CSC Samois, "Dear Samois: As a hetero-sexual feminist" 1).¹²²

Through protests at local bookstores, articles in lesbian magazines, and direct correspondence with activists and "authors [who] condemn Samois and the practice of SM" (*Lesbian Herstory Archives: Subject Files*, Samois, "Commentary December 1980"),¹²³ Samois defended the necessity of their publications and their right to be circulated nationwide. For example, Samois wrote to *off our backs* magazine in

¹²¹ "Samois Correspondence, March 1982"

¹²² "Samois Correspondence, August-October 1981"

¹²³ Folder 12610 "S&M," Microfilm Reel 124: 29

September 1980, inquiring about a check sent in September 1979 for a *What Color* advertisement that has yet to appear:

[*What Color*] contains little in the way of explicit sexual content. . . . We must take issue here since you have, in the past, accepted ads for and/or run reviews of other sexuality books (The Joy of Lesbian Sex, A Woman's Touch, Liberating Masturbation, Sapphistry, What Lesbians Do, The Hite Report), which present a great deal of explicit sexual imagery and “how to” which our 45 page booklet does not contain. A few of these books have been produced by male-owned commercial presses, though most are from small presses or have been self-published by, for and about women/feminists/lesbians—a category within which ‘What Color...’ appropriately fits. (*Lesbian Herstory Archives: Subject Files*, Samois, “Letter to *off our backs* September 22, 1980”)¹²⁴

Despite facing challenges in publishing and circulating their material, Samois’s *What Color* and *Coming to Power* succeeded in providing a new discursive context and model for women nationwide, creating a collective narrative that allowed women to discuss desires and practices that they were unable to articulate otherwise. Significantly, Samois’s call for submissions for *Coming to Power* emphasizes that “closet writers and artists are especially encouraged to come out and take advantage of this opportunity. (Use a pen name or pseudonym if you’d like.)” (*Lesbian Herstory Archives: Subject Files*, Samois, “Summer 1980”).¹²⁵ Many women took this to heart: over half of the work that

¹²⁴ Folder 12610 “S&M,” Microfilm Reel 124: 26.

¹²⁵ Folder 12610 “S&M,” Microfilm Reel 124: 19

appears in *Coming to Power* is published under a pseudonym or as “anonymous.” This incitement to discourse, particularly to closeted SM women, gave rise to a proliferation of self-discovery narratives that would continue far beyond the scope of the book. Not only did Samois specifically ask for women to reflect on and narrativize their SM practice for publication, but by printing such material, these texts produced sexual and social scripts that formed the basis for a collective lesbian SM identity.

The collective narrative instantiated by Samois’s texts was largely preoccupied with carving out a space for lesbian SM community and practices in a lesbian-feminist context that was—due to the rhetoric of the sex wars—particularly hostile to sexual diversity. Unlike Townsend’s *Handbook* and other gay leather texts, “lesbian s/m discussions . . . rarely historicize the practice any farther back than the early 1970s, and most contextualize it, if not assign it as an originary moment, within the sex wars of the 1980s. It is as if lesbian s/m is a relatively new phenomenon, disconnected from other historical antecedents, born *within* the contemporary women’s movement” (Hart 74). The different approaches to historicization between lesbian and gay SM mixed-genre texts underscore the creative privilege afforded to gay leathermen in the early 1970s, when leathermen benefited from the existence of an already well-established community and their relative freedom from the politicized anti-SM rhetoric that would permeate lesbian and feminist communities by the early 1980s. Such rhetoric consistently links SM with traditional patriarchal power imbalances and the historical assumption of natural female masochism.¹²⁶ For example, in a 1980 *off our backs* article, Tacie Dejanikus writes:¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Recall, Chapter One’s discussion of Kathy Acker and Freud’s theorization of “natural female masochism.”

didn't we heterosexual women have enough masochistic role playing in faking orgasm, swallowing sperm even when we didn't want to . . . and all the other rituals of our enslavement. . . . [S]ome of our most intense training as girls and women has been to prepare us for our subservient sex roles. . . . Samois members believe that they are helping women by allowing us to acknowledge and to explore power. But the point is to get rid of power roles as much as possible. (*Lesbian Herstory Archives: Subject Files*, Tacie Dejanikus Xeroxed in Samois Organizational Records, "Nov. 1980" 1)¹²⁸

It is not surprising that lesbian SM discourses would counter such claims by emphasizing the uniqueness of their practice and distancing themselves from real world oppression, a rhetorical move found throughout Samois's texts.

This type of anti-historicizing rhetoric can be found in Barbara Lipschutz's "Cathexis: A Preliminary Investigation into the Nature of S-M,"¹²⁹ which was originally published in 1975 but reprinted in 1979 in *What Color*; according to Califia, this was the "earliest publication I have been able to locate that challenged the dichotomy between feminism and S/M" (CTP 246). Lipschutz not only refutes the association between SM and historical instances of violence and oppression against women, but also refutes the

¹²⁷ Interestingly, this article appears photocopied on the same page as a letter from *off our backs* to Samois explaining how *OOB* plans to review *What Color* again and continue their discussion about whether or not running an ad in the magazine would be appropriate. On the same page we find a handwritten note by Samois reading—"Just so we know who's who and what they think."

¹²⁸ Folder 12610 "S&M," Microfilm Reel 124: 27

¹²⁹ This article also de-links lesbian SM from heterosexual SM, clarified by Lipschutz in an "Author's Note" that explains how she only believes SM can be liberating "for women within a lesbian-feminist context" even going so far as to say that a woman trusting a man in an SM scene "would be a perversion of masochism and counter-revolutionary" (*What Color* 8).

psychoanalytic tendency to link an individual's personal history with adult SM desire, specifically taking issue with "how childhood punishment and trauma are cited as the 'causation' of S-M" (*What Color* 9). Instead, she suggests that SM desire is even more primal, speculating that "the love of pleasure, cathected from pain, is imprinted on the collective unconscious, written on the genetic code of all (some?) of us" (*What Color* 9). Despite postulating that SM impulses *might* be biological, Lipschutz's piece does not acknowledge potential historical analogues of contemporary SM practice, as gay male texts do. Lipschutz's insistence on making a distinct break from recorded history and the patriarchal past becomes the most significant aspect of her piece, particularly since this type of narrative allows SM lesbians to produce, ex nihilo, the culture they want to belong to, effectively using "narrative as a form not only of representing but of constituting reality" (Bruner, "Narrative Construction of Reality" 5).

Mixed-genre lesbian SM texts do, however, acknowledge their literary antecedents. *What Color* includes a "Lesbian-Feminist Guide to Literature on Sodomasochism," even though "not every article included or cited has been produced by S/M lesbians. We drew material from other sources because it is all we have so far" (*What Color*, "About This Publication"). While it is true that lesbians are more likely to emphasize a paucity of material in terms of literary antecedents and refuse to situate lesbian SM within extended histories, these texts identify gay male SM subculture as a valuable resource. SM lesbians limit their historicizing narratives by selectively identifying themselves "in terms of membership positions vis-à-vis others that help to trace the narrator's identity within the context of social relationships, groups, and institutions" (Bamberg 242), and in this case that context is gay male leather culture.

The guide to literature recommends texts by gay leathermen like Vanden, Andros, Carney, and Townsend, amongst others, explaining that “gay male writing provides some welcome relief from the ubiquitous heterosexism of most SM writing, and the male homosexual aesthetic is in many respects easier to assimilate within a lesbian and feminist perspective” (*What Color* 41).¹³⁰ However, *What Color* goes to great lengths to differentiate itself from the politically problematic “SM” fiction written for heterosexual audiences—a subsection entitled “Know Thine Enemy” includes a scathing critique of the *Gor* series:¹³¹ “lesbian feminist sadomasochists are engaged in destroying this kind of heterosexism, male chauvinism, and biological determinism exemplified by Norman’s books. We are fighting to reclaim our eroticism from the patriarchal colonization to which it has been subjected” (*What Color* 43).

Aside from lesbians’ avoidance of extended historicization of SM, lesbian and gay mixed-genre texts further differ in the function of erotic anecdotes. Townsend explicitly states the rhetorical function of his embedded anecdotal narratives—they are ostensibly true accounts meant to illustrate the various aspects of SM practice and life in which he is instructing the reader—whereas the material in *Coming to Power* includes

¹³⁰ The appeal of gay SM pornography is elaborated on in later pro-sex lesbian SM texts, like a group interview, “When Girls Look at Boys” (*on our backs*, July-August 1989: 29-31, 42-43), in which one woman notes how with gay pornography she feels, “you don’t worry about ‘they’re being objectified’” (43). She goes on to express the appeal of pornographic literature as well: “gay men’s SM porn is not only of relatively high quality, it’s also queer . . . [and] I am usually more comfortable with same sex material even if the sex is male” (43). Similarly, in “Another Place to Breathe (1998),” a group interview with Amber Hollibaugh, Gayle Rubin, and Cherrie Moraga, Hollibaugh remarks how lesbian porn “was boring . . . really flat. . . . If you wanted a place you could play with desire and see all kinds of explicit sexualities and things happening, gay male porn” is an ideal space to find it (*Dangerous Desires* 149). In the same interview, Rubin observes how the “creative spectatorship” when watching gay male porn “doesn’t require quite as much creativity as with straight porn. And sometimes not as much conflict” (*Dangerous Desires* 150).

¹³¹ First published in 1966, *Gor* is an extensive science fiction series authored by John Norman. On the planet Gor, “Norman envisions sadomasochism as the sexual equivalent of a social system of male domination, and furthermore he believes male sexual and social domination to be biologically grounded” (*What Color* 43).

“different kinds of erotic fiction written with a broad range of experience. Some of it is strictly fantasy-focused, some uses conventional S/M imagery, and some is more experimental” (CTP 12). Samois’s explicit solicitation and inclusion of SM fantasy narratives, as opposed to Townsend’s emphasis on the veracity of his erotic anecdotes, further speaks to how mixed-genre lesbian texts contribute to queer world-making through a “doing of queer futurity,” to again invoke Muñoz’s terminology. Like the lesbian SM pornography discussed in the last chapter, Samois’s publication of fantasy narratives invoke erotic scenarios and sexual-social experiences that might not yet exist, effectively making a queerer future accessible to readers.

This is not to say that the erotic material in mixed-genre lesbian texts was without instructional potential. Some of *Coming to Power*’s erotic pieces are, in fact, explicitly illustrative of particular aspects of SM practice. These anonymous pieces are published in sections entitled “Handkerchief Codes: Interlude I” and “Interlude II,” each of which contains several micro-fiction vignettes that illustrate the hanky color/sexual act under which they are titled: “Red (Fist-fucking),” “Gray (Bondage),” “White and White Lace (Novice and Victorian),” “Brown (Shit),” “Yellow (Golden Showers),” and “Khaki (Uniforms and Military).” Interestingly, some of these vignettes narrativize the pleasurable potential of fantasy and its relation to embodied practice. By demonstrating how an act’s erotic appeal can be used to fuel an embodied SM encounter, even if the fantasy act remains unactualized, these pieces further encourage readers to harness the power of fantasy in pursuit of queer pleasures. This can be seen in the conclusion to the “Brown” vignette from “Interludes II” when the first-person narrator observes “that a lady can say, ‘Shit! Oh no! I’d never touch that!’ and still be very moved by it” (CTP

153).

Despite placing less overt emphasis on the instructional potential of erotic anecdotes, the illustrative micro-fiction genre found in *Coming to Power's* “Hanky Interludes” persisted as a characteristic of subsequent lesbian SM texts. By linking the reader’s embodied arousal with erotic education, these mixed-genre texts essentially reward readers for learning. As noted in my discussion of the *Handbook*, these pleasurable and pedagogical intentions should be read as queer world-making practices for how they enable the production of an informed community of readers, and by extension, practitioners.

Amidst a variety of educational articles that detail an array of safe-sex guidelines, precautions, and recommendations for lesbian SM practitioners in *The Safety Manual*, there are also three brief erotic stories by Dorothy Allison entitled “Condom Sense,” “Dammit!,” and “A Little Night Music.” Like the stories following a specific hanky code color in *Coming to Power*, each of Allison’s stories takes up the theme of the instructional article immediately preceding it and integrates its safe-sex knowledge into the erotic scene. For instance, “Condom Sense,” follows an article entitled “Vaginal and Anal Penetration.” The story illustrates a military-themed SM scene in which the dominant, A.J., eroticizes condom use. Specifically, A.J. will not allow her submissive, Jamie, to touch A.J.’s “rubber cock” before Jamie has successfully opened and sheathed it with a condom using only her mouth (*Safety Manual* 47). Similarly, Allison’s “A Little Night Music,” which details a highly formalized Victorian SM scene of caning and blood play, follows an article on the categories of and necessary safety precautions for a variety of SM sub-fetishes like breath play, corporal punishment, and blood sports.

The importance of stories as a significant source of sexual knowledge in queer culture is by no means new; as Michael Warner observes, gays and lesbians “learn new pleasures from others,” and even when the same tastes or practices are not shared, “we do share . . . an ability to swap stories and learn from them, to enter new scenes not entirely of our own making” (*Trouble* 178). The possibility of entering into and learning from sexual scenes that are not of your own making is largely enabled by the brevity of Allison’s stories, which frustrate any attempt to parse the personal or social history of the characters. Details that would ordinarily enable a reader to visualize a character and postulate an identity are entirely absent from Allison’s micro-fictions, much as in the hanky code “Interludes” in *Coming to Power*. The structure of Allison’s stories, each barely two pages in length and each beginning in the middle of an erotic scene, refocuses the reader’s attention on the specificity of the action depicted, with particular emphasis on the progression of sexual acts the characters partake in. By deemphasizing the individual subject positions of her characters in these three narratives, Allison makes it impossible for a reader to discern the character’s class, race, or even psychological motivation for participating in SM.

In contrast to the specificity (in terms of source, names, and location) of Townsend’s illustrative anecdotes, the sparse details of the illustrative anecdotes found in *The Lesbian S/M Safety Manual* allow readers to more easily project themselves into the sexual scene, and in doing so, these micro-fictions further underscore the collaborative process between text and reader. It is interesting that this collaborative process, which fueled the creation of an unprecedented community for SM lesbians, was partially made possible by the lack of citational, legitimating details that mark Townsend’s anecdotes as

narratives that are specific to a single individual's experience. In effect, the absence of detail in Allison's stories more easily enables them to become models for cultural scripts that any reader can assimilate and make their own—a function that is made more explicit by their publication in a “manual.” By linking technical knowledge with arousal, these micro-fictions produce scripts that readers can draw from in their pursuit of embodied SM pleasure, effectively expanding readers' sense of the possible.

The link between embodied SM practices and lesbian SM texts goes beyond the circulation of informational how-to material in that these texts position themselves as stepping-stones toward the production of further knowledge. As Katherine Davis explains in the introduction to *Coming to Power*, “we offer you this document and hope that you will use it well, for personal exploration and as a tool for dialogue” (13). Samois's success in this matter is reflected by the plethora of sexual theorizing and knowledge production found in letters from the archive, particularly those letters that interweave autobiographical explanations with descriptive erotic scenes and theory in ways that are reminiscent of the work performed by *Coming to Power*.

For example, Juicy Lucy's piece in *Coming to Power* theorizes the value of SM in terms of developing deeper self-awareness and knowledge about power dynamics in relationships that extend beyond the bedroom. In “If I Ask You To Tie Me Up,” Juicy Lucy contrasts consensual SM sexual practice with the unspoken abuses of power in interpersonal (lesbian) romantic relationships, the latter of which she calls “emotional SM” (CTP 32-3). Juicy Lucy's claims are reified and expanded upon in many letters Samois received in response to *Coming to Power*. For instance, one woman discusses the hypocrisy of her local lesbian community, which ostracized her when she came out about

SM. By labeling this woman's SM desires as deviant, lesbians in her community can distance themselves from SM's stigma, even while they fail to acknowledge "the power games that Lesbians practice with each other" (CSC Samois, "March 18, 1982" 3).¹³² Much like Juicy Lucy, this letter writer explains, "I say that if you want to play that [power game] with me, we'll do it on a sexual level, but no more head trips; and they cannot see the connection. I am some horrible pervert, they're just ordinary Lesbian women" (CSC Samois, "March 18, 1982" 3).¹³³ A woman writing to Samois from Massachusetts also recognizes the difference between SM and emotional SM. Her letter describes how, following a breakup with her SM play partner, she finds herself "being sadistic and masochistic in ways that I don't feel healthy about—I felt healthier when my need to dominate and be dominated was spoken and honest" (CSC Samois, "Dear Samois, I would like a copy of" p50).¹³⁴ The collective approach to identity and social-sexual knowledge found in these letters' replication and individuation of *Coming to Power's* scripts, suggests how SM narratives' incitement of further narratives establishes the discursive and cultural context from which communities form and from which social-sexual knowledges are produced.

As this reading has shown, the link between mixed-genre lesbian SM texts and embodied experience is more immediately mediated by female SM organizations than it is by an oral tradition, like that from which Townsend's *Handbook* emerged. Indeed, Samois's texts, *What Color* and *Coming to Power* effectively made a lesbian SM subculture possible. Although Samois's texts are the most obvious and the earliest

¹³² "Samois Correspondence, March 1982"

¹³³ "Samois Correspondence, March 1982"

¹³⁴ "Samois Correspondence, March 1982"

example, subsequent mixed-genre lesbian SM texts also draw from the community and educational work of later SM organizations. For instance, “Some of the material in [*The Lesbian S/M Safety Manual*] was gathered to use in the orientations for new members of the Lesbian Sex Mafia (LS/M). . . . I want to thank them for their assistance and support for making this information more widely available” (Califia, *Safety Manual*, “Front Matter”).¹³⁵

That *Coming to Power* was itself inspired by the hundreds of letters sent to Samois in response to *What Color*—letters expressing how “lesbians do want more information about S/M, from political analysis to fantasy material” (*CTP* 9)—further demonstrates mixed-genre texts’ impact on community formation, knowledge production, and embodied experience. Indeed, archival evidence suggests the degree to which the circulation of Samois’s texts catalyzed the production of lesbian SM consciousness nationwide, and with it the production of a collective subculture. This was largely accomplished through the circulation of subcultural scripts in these texts, scripts which would go on to form the basis of a collective identity nationwide from which a plethora of sexual-social communities would develop. Thus, these links reveal the extent to which SM is mediated by narrative.

EVIDENCE IN THE ARCHIVES

The Samois and Larry Townsend archives at The Center for Sex and Culture in

¹³⁵ The Lesbian Sex Mafia (LS/M) was founded by Dorothy Allison and Jo Arnone in New York in 1981 and it is “the oldest continuously running women’s BDSM support and education groups in the country” (*Lesbiansexmafia.org*, “About”).

San Francisco¹³⁶ contain myriad primary materials that range from letters and photographs to organizational records and newsletters, book reviews, and flyers for social events. The bulk of the material in both archives consists of letters from readers of Townsend's and Samois's publications. The material in these archives offers evidence of how SM has historically functioned as a communitarian force. I have chosen Townsend's and Samois's archives specifically due to the significant and foundational impact the *Handbook* and *Coming to Power* had on subsequent gay and lesbian SM texts and gay and lesbian SM communities, respectively. In Townsend, the correspondence includes his exchanges with notable gay pornography authors, such as John Preston, in which they discuss potential collaborations on a variety of anthologies; correspondence with editors relating to the publication of Townsend's work; and a host of personal correspondence from aspiring authors and illustrators, fans and lovers, and propositions from fans who eventually become lovers. In both archives the majority of letters are from readers who request some form of further information or resources, like one woman writing to Samois wanting to find "S/M literature in a subjective, fictional/autobiographical mode . . . lesbian S/M literary work" (CSC Samois, "September 3, 1981" 1).¹³⁷ Townsend's readers often ask for further elaboration on the information presented in the *Handbook* or inquire about a technical aspect of SM not covered by Townsend.

¹³⁶ The Center for Sex and Culture is a publicly accessible, non-profit library, archive, and event space that hosts classes, hands-on workshops, social gatherings, and cultural events. The Center "aims to provide a community center for education, advocacy, research, and support to the widest range of people" ("Mission & Vision"), and it is one of the "few accessible resources for sex education available to the public, not just academics or specialists" ("Mission & Vision"). The Center for Sex and Culture was founded by Carol Queen and her partner, Robert Lawrence, in 1997.

¹³⁷ "Samois Correspondence, August-October 1981"

The Samois archive letters are unique for their emphasis on politics, community organizing, and activism, as well as the frequency of letters that include narratives about women experiencing hardship or oppression as a result of SM desires, in contrast to the letters written to Townsend, which tend to focus less on politics and more on individuals' pleasures and practices and their place in larger gay social-sexual communities. The letters to Samois are further distinguished from the Townsend archives by their mention of Samois's role in Lesbian herstory and by how often women ordering Samois's texts also express the economic cost of doing so,¹³⁸ the latter of which certainly speaks to the necessity and importance of having access to *What Color* and *Coming to Power*. Throughout the Samois letters we find recurrent praise for the bravery of Samois's community and publishing work, which differs in tone from the gratitude expressed by Townsend's fans, many of whom are immensely thankful for the *Handbook*, but do not equate the act of writing and publishing it with bravery. As one woman from Alaska writes to Samois in 1981, "I am impressed with the women who have responded in publications about their personal S-M experiences & sign their full names. They are brave women . . ." (CSC Samois, "October 24, 1981" 1).¹³⁹ Unlike the Townsend letters, which are overwhelmingly from men, the Samois letters are less likely to contain a direct sexual proposition, though one exception to this trend can be found in a 1981 letter from a 27 year old man in England who requests to "join your group and/or make contact with any of your members who may wish to contact me. The fact is that I have longed for many years (since childhood) to act out my fantasies, which involve my being

¹³⁸ Like one woman writing to Samois from Winnipeg and saying, "I'd love to hear more from women who feel like me about Lesbian sex. I've enclosed the only U.S. dollar I have hoping you'll send me some literature" (CSC Samois, "Samois Correspondence, August-October 1981": "October 20, 1981" 1).

¹³⁹ "Samois Correspondence, August-October 1981"

subservient to and dominated and humiliated by a lesbian-feminist woman or group of such women” (CSC Samois, “September 19, 1981” 1).¹⁴⁰ Townsend’s archive even contains letters from heterosexual men, like a 1986 letter from a man in Chicago who asks how he can keep effeminate gay bottoms from hitting on him when he socializes with gay leathermen (CSC Townsend, “August 25, 1986” 1-2).¹⁴¹

In both Townsend’s and Samois’s archives, a significant number of letters express both the embodied and psychic impact of Samois’s or Townsend’s texts, often articulating relief upon learning that one is not alone in having SM desires and/or describing specific plans to improve queer social or sexual experience. In the most practical sense, this can be seen when individuals write to make themselves available as a community resource, as in one 1983 letter to Townsend in which the author makes himself “available to a few of your associates who have become eunuchs. . . . I can offer help to a few at a time. I offer this help in all seriousness” (CSC Townsend, “September 27, 1983” 1),¹⁴² or one letter to Samois from a doctor who clarifies that when she offered the name of her clinic as a resource where “your members could receive non-judgmental health care” she now believes “it is best to list just my name rather than the clinic as a reference since the clinic has several providers with many different views” (CSC Samois, “To Whom It May Concern, I was at your” 1).¹⁴³

Like the letters to Townsend, those found in Samois’s archives include SM self-discovery narratives that emphasize how Samois’s texts initiated access to SM’s pleasures. A great many of these letters come from women who do not have access to a

¹⁴⁰ “Samois Correspondence, August-October 1981”

¹⁴¹ “Techniques and Specialties”

¹⁴² “Techniques and Specialties”

¹⁴³ “Samois Correspondence, August-October 1981”

local leather community and have faced stigma or fear social ostracism from their local lesbian and feminist communities if they were to make public their preference for SM. Such letters express how these feelings of isolation and self-doubt are greatly mitigated by the discovery of Samois's texts.

Letters that emphasize the embodied impact of the mixed-genre texts, often focus on an increase in sexual pleasure—like a 1977 letter to Townsend that describes how confident the letter-writer is that he and his lover “will enjoy our sexual encounters more for having read [the *Handbook*]” (CSC Townsend, “December 31, 1977” 2).¹⁴⁴ Even more importantly, many letters express an ecstatic pleasure of identification, as in another 1979 letter to Townsend from a man in Los Angeles who explains how “all my life I thought I WAS THE ONLY ONE WITH THESE ‘SO-CALLED’ WEIRD DESIRES, but through your publication... [I] find I am NOT alone in these desires” (CSC Townsend, “May 15, 1979” 1).¹⁴⁵ Similarly, a 1982 letter to Samois from a bookseller in Colorado explains how she never knew that other women felt similarly about sex and power until reading *Coming to Power*, in which “the images of strong, virile, sexual and powerful women completely turned me on. It made me feel SANE again, that others shared my ideas and experiences” (CSC Samois, “March 8, 1982” 3).¹⁴⁶ Not only do these letters provide information about the circulation of the mixed-genre texts and their impact on embodied experiences and historical communities, but in the case of Samois's archival material, there is even evidence to suggest how such effects facilitated the production of organized community and political work that, in turn, further enabled the materialization

¹⁴⁴ “Techniques and Specialties”

¹⁴⁵ “Techniques and Specialties”

¹⁴⁶ “Samois Correspondence, March 1982”

of the types of queer relationality modeled and discussed in *What Color* and *Coming to Power*.

Indeed, many letters to Samois contain a mode of self-writing in which a reiteration and assimilation of the content and genres found in Samois's texts enables individuals to constitute their sense of (SM) identity, effectively using correspondence with Samois to join a collective subcultural narrative. That such narratives are found in Samois's archives from women across the country underscores Samois's success in developing "a network of personal support for S/M lesbians and a safe space in which to explore, understand, accept, and enhance our erotic identities. Lesbian sadomasochists are isolated by the silence which surrounds our sexuality. . . . Samois is an attempt to build community, lessen isolation, and sharpen consciousness" (*What Color*, "Our Statement" 3).

One example of this replicatory tendency can be found in the interweaving of personal erotic anecdotes with sexual theory, as in a 1982 letter from a San Francisco lesbian who calls *Coming to Power* "a beautiful book because it is written by US," despite the "surprising lack of pieces written by tops" (Samois CSC p24).¹⁴⁷ After offering an extensive narration of her erotic experiences as a top, including detailed descriptions of fisting, she builds on the theoretical work found in *Coming to Power* by offering up her own theorization of SM that is rooted in the different knowledges imparted by the experiences of topping and bottoming: "S/M is a form through which I can challenge, confront, test, direct and ride my own sexual powers, this is our life-force, the original creative energy which animates us with spirit, vigor, imagination, creativity,

¹⁴⁷ "Samois Correspondence, March 1982"

motivation, and lust. . . . There is power in receptivity and endurance and shedding skin but it is qualitatively different than the power in action, in movement, in command and control. S/M is a challenge to wield this power, this potency with grace and skill and the delicacy of force” (CSC Samois, “Dear sisters of Samois” 1). Significantly, this letter identifies SM’s positive-productive potential and its ability to produce new knowledges along with new forms of queer relationality: “By synthesizing our clarity, our courage, our fierce pride and our anger we can arrive on the threshold of creating a whole new dynamic of socail [sic] and political interchange. By learning the joy of exercising our strengths and power to produce action we can create new concepts beyond the old of power, strength, lust. We have that potential in our hands” (CSC Samois, “Dear sisters of Samois” 2).¹⁴⁸ This letter contributes to the production of knowledge on which lesbian SM practices are based. Furthermore, its conclusion—the assertion that SM endows women with the power to produce new narratives about sex and power that can effect social-sexual changes in queer life—echoes the incitement to discourse in *Coming to Power*’s introduction, as well as *Coming to Power*’s pragmatic intentions.

Taken together, these mixed-genre texts and archival materials chart the history, trajectories, and branches of the queer leather community and reveal the degree to which SM identities relied on “the interplay of selected readings and assimilative writing . . . to form an identity” (Foucault, “Self Writing” 214). This is particularly apparent in the frequency with which the letters contain an SM self-discovery narrative echoing those found in the mixed-genre texts.

¹⁴⁸ “Samois Correspondence, March 1982”

I quote at length from a 1982 letter sent to Samois from a lesbian couple in Minnesota because this single letter reflects all of the dominant archival trends noted above and because it epitomizes the relation between narrative and SM practice and identity. Through their letter, these women express how they came to recognize a collective narrative as their own and their desire to join that narrative, while reiterating it on their own terms—a process of identification that reflects how “shared story memories within social groups define particular social selves” (Schank and Abelson, “Knowledge and Memory” 1). The letter opens by expressing unbridled enthusiasm: “. . . now that our screams of surprise and pure, lustful joy have subsided we can settle down to thank you for *Coming to Power*! We are two Lesbian/Fems . . . just beginning our sojourn with S/M” (CSC Samois, “March 9, 1982” 1).¹⁴⁹ Its opening jubilation indicates the ecstatic pleasure of identification allowed by lesbian authored SM narratives: how the erotic, instructional, and analytical essays on politics and community formation in *Coming to Power* alerted them to the existence of communities of women with whom they can identify and with whom they might share SM pleasures. The letter also echoes the kind of erotic self-writing found in *Coming to Power*, particularly for its narration about developing their sexual self-knowledge, their experience of oppression within the women’s community, and their investment in developing and joining a community of SM lesbians.

Much of the letter speaks to the reliance of their SM pleasures on narrative, while the letter’s very existence and the variety of embodied and discursive practices it relates hinge on a shared narrative amongst a community of SM lesbians, which Samois’s texts

¹⁴⁹ “Samois Correspondence, March 1982”

enabled. Like the SM self-discovery narratives in *Coming to Power*, the Minnesota letter begins with repression: “both of us being repressed . . . one of us playing with [SM] in her many Lesbian relationships and thinking she’s fucked-up, and the other totally wiping-out her S/M fantasies of a lifetime the very day after having seen the WAVAW slideshow on porn in the media (and then Mary Daly didn’t help matters anyway)”¹⁵⁰ (CSC Samois, “March 9, 1982” 1).¹⁵¹ Like the scripts modeled in *Coming to Power*, which “did not just report their experiences of being subjected to feminist bigotry, but also recounted how lesbian sadomasochists were courageously fighting against it” (Khan 100), this couple emphasizes the impact anti-SM feminist discourses had on their personal lives—in terms of sexual practices, identity, (lack of) community, and personal well-being—and their triumphant healing and bonding over their shared experiences of oppression. That these women felt compelled to narrativize their experience, and in doing so, resist hegemonic narratives about SM as a perversion, underscores how these letters and Samois’s texts more generally constitute a Foucauldian reverse discourse wherein practitioners’ narratives of sexual nonnormativity enable them to speak back to power.

Through an extended series of erotic anecdotes embedded within the SM self-discovery narrative, the Minnesota letter proceeds to relate how encountering discourses about lesbian SM enabled them to verbalize and then pursue SM desire: after hours of talking and walking while discussing power and pleasure, these two women have an

¹⁵⁰ WAVAW or Women Against Violence Against Women was founded in Los Angeles in 1976 and became “the initial grassroots group of the feminist anti-pornography movement” (Bronstein 82). Indeed, their development of anti-pornography slideshows that often juxtaposed images of consensual SM with images of rape and violence proved highly influential on subsequent anti-porn groups during the sex wars. As a prominent feminist philosopher and lesbian separatist, Mary Daly was highly critical of patriarchal society and all expressions of androcentrism, the latter of which could be said to manifest in the hypermasculinity of gay male SM.

¹⁵¹ “Samois Correspondence, March 1982”

initial SM scene one evening, after which they serendipitously find Califia's *Sapphistry*. While the top reads aloud from the section on SM, "the silenced bottom begins to speak of her fantasies haltingly—her aching cunt making speech difficult—" (CSC Samois, "March 9, 1982" 1).¹⁵² This couple finds lesbian SM narratives so powerful that after finding *Coming to Power* and "read[ing] a description which so typified her recent experience of feelin [sic] the dread and thrill of her lover's power that she burst into tears. Samois, thank you for your book and your existence" (CSC Samois, "March 9, 1982" 1-2).¹⁵³

Frequently, the verbalization of SM desire through the narrative scripts found in mixed-genre texts leads to the materialization of embodied SM pleasure. Indeed, the Minnesota letter goes on to explain how after this couple's first taste of shared SM pleasure, "there's no stopping us now. An already hot sadist is getting hotter, and a man-mauled masochist finds a way to begin to tear down the walls of distance from her bodily pleasures" (CSC Samois, "March 9, 1982" 1).¹⁵⁴ More importantly, access to these subcultural scripts and the pleasures they facilitate leads to an immediate need for additional information and community. As the couple from Minnesota explains, "we crave more support and information," and so they formed a Minneapolis SM support group for lesbians. Thus, their ecstatic pleasure of identification extends beyond individual, embodied, sexual pleasures and also facilitates the development of self-knowledge and of community. Interestingly, their pursuit of community necessitated the production of still further SM narrative in the form of a newsletter, since the "radical"

¹⁵² "Samois Correspondence, March 1982"

¹⁵³ "Samois Correspondence, March 1982"

¹⁵⁴ "Samois Correspondence, March 1982"

Lesbian rag, the Inciter has refused to print our simple announcement” for the group (CSC Samois, “March 9, 1982” 2).¹⁵⁵ Here we have evidence of how *Coming to Power*’s SM self-discovery narratives inspire not only narratives in correspondence with Samois, but also the production of further knowledge in texts that will allow still more women to find a shared discourse about power and pleasure to claim as their own.

From the mention of the WAVAW slideshow on porn in the media, through their censorship in local lesbian media, to the pornographic film *Story of O*, the soundtrack to *Last Tango in Paris*, Adrienne Rich’s *Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, Califia’s *Sapphistry*, and Samois’s *Coming to Power*—the Minnesota letter emphasizes the degree to which cultural productions have thwarted, informed, and enabled this couple’s burgeoning sexual self-knowledge; however, it is the work of Samois and the identification made possible by Samois’s text that prove the most influential.

The letter concludes with how they “no longer feel so isolated. . . . So, after we have gotten our Minneapolis S/M support group together a few times, we will be leaving to ‘swim upstream like salmon’ and move to San Francisco. Hope to be meeting you all in May” (CSC Samois, “March 9, 1982” 2).¹⁵⁶ Here, SM narrative operates not solely in terms of the pleasures of authorship or sexual pleasures, but potential future pleasures as well. In doing so, this letter further suggests the future-oriented temporality that inheres in the ecstatic pleasure of identification and in SM’s relationship to narrative.

Specifically, the community/political actions they plan on pursuing in order to create a local SM lesbian community in Minneapolis aligns these women with Samois’s activist

¹⁵⁵ “Samois Correspondence, March 1982”

¹⁵⁶ “Samois Correspondence, March 1982”

work; in effect Samois's narratives and actions model subcultural scripts that are taken up and replicated by Samois's readers. In turn, such community work facilitates the realization of individual sexual fantasy scenarios by producing a social space that makes possible previously unavailable modes of queer relationality, effectively beginning the whole process over again.

In this sense, the letter's final temporal turn towards the future demonstrates how SM functions as a pleasure, a practice, and a narrative in ways that are bound up with the temporality of identity and self, how "identity consists not simply of a self-narrative that integrates one's past events into a coherent story. . . . It also includes the construction of a future story that continues the 'I' of the person" (Polkinghorne 107). Thus, the symbiotic relationship between SM and narrative suggested by the letter, speaks to the degree that SM subculture is more broadly reliant on narrative. In other words, SM narratives establish a subcultural context from which new modes of queer relationality and community formation emerge, further signaling how SM's narrativity constitutes a mode of queer futurity and world-making in a Muñozian sense.

One of the distinguishing features of the letters found in Townsend's archive that is not reflected in the paradigmatic Minnesota letter is the frequency with which fans send him elaborate sexual propositions. These letters tend to include individual fantasy scenarios involving Townsend, along with an explanation of the sender's experience level and limits, which often take the form of an SM self-discovery narrative. The letters with sexual propositions for Townsend use narrative as a way of projecting future SM pleasures that are largely derived from Townsend's own text. Thus, the sexual propositions found in Townsend's archives—many of which are reminiscent of (or make

direct reference to) the erotic material found in the *Handbook*—call on the critical promise of fantasy. In these instances the goal is not the social sexual fantasy of a queerer future (as with SM lesbians and their emphasis on community formation), but rather the realization of an individual sexual fantasy. Despite these different foci, both Samois's and Townsend's archival letters suggest SM's future-oriented temporality.

Such is the case with a 1974 letter sent from a middle-aged sailor in Oakland who writes "Master, reading your 'Leatherman's Handbook' and 'Leather Ad I & II' turned me on Sir," so much so that he "craves the privilege and pleasure of being your slave, if it pleases you for a few days Sir" (CSC Townsend, "November 14, 1974" 1).¹⁵⁷ Although he has "been around the S&M block a few times . . . [he] is not totally experienced," an admission followed by an extended anecdote about his introduction to SM in Minneapolis bathhouses following the Korean War (CSC Townsend, "November 14, 1974" 1).¹⁵⁸ This SM self-discovery narrative includes not only erotic descriptions of specific acts, but also details about the dominance/submission dynamic in which he was instructed and how his first dominant "stud claimed he didn't want to share me with the members of a private S&M club in one of the suburbs of Minneapolis" (CSC Townsend, "November 14, 1974" 1).¹⁵⁹ This letter includes recollected dialogue-exchanges between this man and his dominant "stud," which are followed by a detailed fantasy narrative that articulates what he would like to experience while submitting to Townsend (CSC Townsend, "November 14, 1974" 2-5).¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ "Townsend Fan Requests"

¹⁵⁸ "Townsend Fan Requests"

¹⁵⁹ "Townsend Fan Requests"

¹⁶⁰ "Townsend Fan Requests"

Such projections are not merely idle fantasies; the number of letters that indicate previous correspondence with Townsend and even mention previous physical encounters indicate the extent to which these projections of possible pleasures successfully produced embodied SM experiences. Such is the case in one 1973 letter to Townsend from a man enlisted in the Navy. Not only does the letter refer to previous correspondence, but it also narrates an individual sexual fantasy in which he would have Townsend “tie my hands in front of me and take me across your leather clad knees sort of the way the illustration goes for your ad for ‘The Leatherman’s Handbook’” (CSC Townsend, “November 26, 1973” 2),¹⁶¹ going on to outline further details of the scene including being paddled, fucked, and pissed in. The letter clarifies that “this isn’t fantasy, its [sic] for real. I’ve had a similar scene with a guy once and it was super. Hope it could satisfy you” (CSC Townsend, “November 26, 1973” 3).¹⁶² This letter also directly references the *Handbook*: “I dig getting screwed by a neat leather guy and want to assure you the scene wouldn’t be a one way deal” like an anecdote from the *Handbook* about a non-reciprocatory scene in which a young Marine ejaculated on Townsend’s leather pants and then left (CSC Townsend, “November 26, 1973” 3).¹⁶³ In the *Handbook*, Townsend explains that after being paddled, the young man ejaculated though he “had given [Townsend] no warning of what he was going to do; he had offered no outlet for [Townsend], nor expressed any concern except for himself. It was strictly a ‘Spank me, Daddy!’ scene” (*Handbook* 70). The assurances in this letter are followed by a list of his deployment schedule in the coming months, an inquiry about Townsend’s availability on specific dates, and his hope

¹⁶¹ “Townsend Fan Requests”

¹⁶² “Townsend Fan Requests”

¹⁶³ “Townsend Fan Requests”

“to keep in touch while I’m gone, if that’s cool. I know you get many letters such as mine with far out fantasies & fetishes. Mine are for real if you can dig on it. Really want to see you again” (CSC Townsend, “November 26, 1973” 4).¹⁶⁴

This letter makes several important narrative moves: the fantasies outlined are themselves evocative of the illustrative anecdotes found in the *Handbook*; the letter mentions how these erotic scenarios would improve upon a specific first-hand anecdote about Townsend’s SM practice; and there is an emphasis on the relation between reality and fantasy, as with Townsend’s authentication of anecdotes by detailing their provenance, this letter consistently references past embodied SM experiences, not to mention how part of the letter’s extended erotic anecdote was explicitly inspired by an illustration from an advertisement for Townsend’s *Handbook*.

We might turn to Warner’s observations regarding pornography and its significant role in gay community life and identity to clarify the importance of such narratives from the archives and their relation to mixed-genre SM texts. Warner explains how pornography provides young queers, closeted people, or geographically isolated (potential-)queers with “publicly certifiable recognition” (*Trouble* 185) since, “in order for the porn to exist, not only did some of its producers have to have gay sex, they and many others had to acknowledge that they were having it” (Warner, *Trouble* 184). Here, Warner repurposes the anti-pornography feminist critique that all porn deals in objectification and violence, by arguing that “one of the things porn objectifies is acknowledgement. And . . . not just for identities that are already organized and recognized as legitimate” (*Trouble* 185).

¹⁶⁴ “Townsend Fan Requests”

Indeed, beyond the formation of identity that these texts enabled through their public acknowledgement of SM desire, the mixed-genre texts also made possible new modes of sociality that many readers had not previously considered, in a sense ushering in the possibility of a queerer future. Though these Samois and Townsend letters differ in the types of futures articulated, both of these letters suggest how mixed-genre texts enable readers to imagine pleasures and communities they never thought possible.

Warner emphasizes the importance of publically available evidence that corroborates gay sexual desire, which “has profoundly different meanings for nonnormative sex practices” (*Trouble* 185). Though a pornographic video can certainly be assimilated into one’s own sexual fantasies and might encourage one to pursue such activities, the value of affirmation provided via textual forms appears, from archival evidence, more likely to catalyze the further production of a shared sexual-social knowledge discourse from which a culture can develop. This is particularly given how the modes of self-writing found in the mixed-genre texts and reiterated in the archives enact a technology of the self that “involved a new experience of self” whereby “the experience of self was intensified and widened by virtue of this act of writing. A whole field of experience opened which earlier was absent” (Foucault, “Technologies of Self” 232-33). Furthermore, the importance of the ecstatic pleasure of identification found in the archival letters previously discussed reveals how SM mixed-genre texts provide a valuable source of publicly certifiable recognition, particularly given narrative’s ability to produce a common discourse from which a culture can develop.

The availability of diverse stories that create a shared cultural narrative clarifies how *Coming to Power*, despite its preponderance of erotica (in comparison with the other

mixed-genre texts), equally functions as a pragmatic text with an intent to intervene in the exterior world, much like the more overtly instructive, analytical, or descriptive texts discussed in this chapter. Indeed, mixed-genre lesbian SM texts were equally, if not proportionately *more* influential on the development of a visible lesbian SM culture than the *Handbook* was on gay male leather culture. While Townsend's *Handbook* expedited the shift from an oral tradition to a written one in the early 1970s and in many ways epitomized this shift within gay male leather culture by effecting significant cultural changes in terms of its widespread circulation and accessibility, the *Handbook* was not constitutive of culture in the same way lesbian texts would become. The *Handbook* emulates and encourages the reader to seek out and experience modes of knowledge transmission that approximate those of early gay leather culture. In contrast, lesbian SM texts are not mediated to the same degree by the oral tradition of gay male leather culture.



This chapter has focused on extending the relevance of a positive-productive theorization of SM beyond the textual by demonstrating the applicability of this theory to actual SM communities, identities, and embodied experiences. In doing so, this study of archival materials and mixed-genre SM texts also refines the theory of SM's queer world-making potential, revealing SM's inherently narrative qualities. However, the importance of the relation between SM's queer potentiality and narrative is not limited to queer history or the literature produced by and for queer SM practitioners, though its embodied effects might be. Returning in the next chapter to SM representations in postmodern fiction with this refined understanding of how SM functions, I hope to shed new light on SM representations in canonical American literature. The dependence of SM's queer

pleasures on narrative power becomes especially apparent in the paradigmatic example of SM representations in postmodern fiction, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, published just one year after Townsend's *Handbook*. Thus, understanding how SM both relies on and produces narrative is significant not only when studying the relation between the embodied and the textual in recent queer histories, but also when reevaluating the role and function of queer sexualities in canonical fiction. The diverse applications of this theory speaks to its necessity, particularly for revising dominant theorizations of SM in queer and literary studies that tend to overemphasize SM's disruptive power, while discounting the significant role narrative plays in enabling SM pleasures, identities, communities, and their textual representations.

Chapter 4. Recuperating the (Mindless) Pleasures of *Gravity's Rainbow*

On May 7, 1974, the 14-member Pulitzer Prize advisory board rejected the jury's unanimous recommendation of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* for the prize in fiction. Despite the jury's assessment that "no work of fiction published in 1973 begins to compare in scale, originality and sustained intellectual interest with Mr. Pynchon's book" (Kihss 38), the board described *Gravity's Rainbow* as "'unreadable,' 'turgid,' 'overwritten' and in parts 'obscene'" (Kihss 38), electing to make no award in fiction that year. That the issue of obscenity was even raised by the board—a full eight years after the final literature obscenity trial in the United States, recall my discussion of the 1966 *Naked Lunch* trial in the Introduction—speaks to the enduring power and stigma of SM in American culture. Indeed, Pynchon's pornographic material "approach[es] an extremity or frontier; their nearest landmarks were Burroughs's hanging-ejaculation scenes, themselves warm-up exercises for what Pynchon so graphically depicts" (Herman and Weisenburger 79). The infamy of Pynchon's pornographic, SM material and its power to inform the Pulitzer board's decision long after obscenity had no legal bearing on literature is reason enough to conclude my study of SM in the postmodern era with a discussion of *Gravity's Rainbow*. However, the timing of the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow*—which follows Townsend's *Handbook* by one year and thus coincides with the

emergence of visible queer leather subcultures of the 1970s—makes *Gravity's Rainbow* a particularly fitting selection for my return to canonical literature.

While my initial chapter offered an overview of sadomasochistic representations in postmodern fiction and gestured toward the value of reading postmodern pornographic representations alongside their thematic and temporal counterparts—queer SM subcultures and the associated knowledges, practices, and pleasures of these sexual communities—this final chapter is narrower in its scope, but broader in its implications. This chapter's exclusive focus on SM in *Gravity's Rainbow* is partly inspired by Pynchon's immense significance to foundational understandings of postmodernist narrative. As Brian McHale observes, "so ubiquitous is Pynchon in the discourses about postmodernism that we might go so far as to say, not that postmodern theory depends on Pynchon's fiction for exemplification, but that, without Pynchon's fiction, there might never have been such a pressing need to develop a theory of literary postmodernism in the first place" ("Pynchon's Postmodernism" 97). Thus, demonstrating the relevance of the SM theory developed in the previous chapters to an author as significant as Pynchon speaks to the utility of such a theory in literary studies more generally, particularly for how this approach to canonical representations of sexuality makes visible the interrelatedness of postmodernism and queer pleasures.

In light of the rise of queer theory over the last thirty years, it is surprising that detailed discussions of Pynchon's unparalleled approach to sexuality remain a rarity. Pynchon studies has largely overlooked the ubiquity of queerness throughout Pynchon's oeuvre and discussions of SM's queerness in *Gravity's Rainbow* remain curiously

absent.¹⁶⁵ Aside from the explicit SM scenes in *Gravity's Rainbow*—Katje and Gottfried's submission to Blicero's "Rome-Berlin Axis"; Pudding's coprophagic submission to Katje as Domina Nocturna; Margherita's multiple SM scenes; and the SM climax of Blicero and Gottfried's relationship, when Gottfried is entombed and launched in Rocket 00000—there are innumerable other allusions to SM, such as Leni's observation that Franz Pökler "needed to be at someone's command" (Pynchon 421) and young Enzian's submission to Blicero in South Africa, to name only two. The overarching sadomasochistic valences that permeate *Gravity's Rainbow* are summed up in the final episode by Miklos Thanatz who observes that "a little S and M never hurt anybody" and asks, "but why," then, "are we taught to feel reflexive shame whenever the subject comes up?" (Pynchon 751). Thanatz's answer is simple: the State must manage and claim our submission as resources for itself. Indeed, Thanatz's theorization of "Sado-anarchism"—the notion that universalizing SM pleasures might effect a dissolution of State power—shapes almost every iteration of explicit sexual practice in the novel.

Thanatz's question is also worth turning back on ourselves, since the stigma surrounding SM might partially account for the scarcity of SM discussions in Pynchon criticism as well as the Pulitzer board's rejection of *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1974. As discussed in Chapter One, literary scholarship has generally approached postmodern representations of SM with a degree of suspicion that manifests in SM's desexualization and abstraction to the level of metaphor or satire—a tendency that I began to revise by insisting on the importance of potential pleasures in Burroughs's, Coover's, and Acker's

¹⁶⁵ Queerness has been a consistent component of Pynchon's fiction, from the lesbian obsession in *V.* (1963), to the gay nightlife in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and extending through the homosocial intimacy of *Mason & Dixon* (1997).

sadomasochistic representations. However, the wariness of literary scholars to seriously consider SM as a valid form of sexual expression is taken to the extreme in much of Pynchon studies, where we find vociferous and strident condemnations of SM that safely insulate critics from association with Pynchon's perversities. In Pynchon scholarship, SM material is variously accused of being a pornographic, misogynist fantasy (Bérubé), a regressive representation of homosexuality (Sears), or a commentary on fascism's perverse effects (Herman and Weisenburger).

Since few scholars have analyzed SM's function in *Gravity's Rainbow*—either in terms of politics or Pynchon's postmodern aesthetic—it should come as no surprise that critics have generally overlooked both the narrative significance and political implications of Thanatz's Sado-anarchism. There is, however, a single notable exception to this trend: Harold Bloom, whose observations about Sado-anarchism hint at a new, even hopeful understanding of Pynchon's seminal work, while pointing the way toward a recuperation of SM. Specifically, Bloom laments “the current American paranoia in the Age of George W. Bush,” explaining how this paranoid state “ought to engender an opposing force like the Tristero, an underground postal system that is something of an alternative culture. . . . It is what Pynchon elsewhere terms Sado-anarchism” (10). Bloom goes on to express exhaustion with the contemporary mediasphere before ending with a hopeful wish: “there had better be a Tristero [i.e., Sado-anarchist system], at least in our imaginations” (11).

Bloom's wish notwithstanding, critical discussions of SM in *Gravity's Rainbow* do not link Pynchon's SM material with the political potential of Sado-anarchism as an “opposing force”; rather, the brief discussions that one does find of SM in Pynchon

scholarship tend to emphasize SM's imbrication in the coercive contexts established by Their System (i.e. institutional power). Such readings invariably dismiss how power and pleasure in Pynchon anticipate Foucault's foundational claim that "pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement" (*History* 48), along with the possibility that "the deeper power's corporeal penetration, the greater may be the bodily pleasures of resistance" (Dean, "Biopolitics of Pleasure" 492). The critical choice to play-up the institutional frameworks of some of Pynchon's SM material obscures how the text also links SM with hope and new modes of relationality, in ways reminiscent of the positive-productive approach to SM developed in the previous chapters. Previous, pessimistic readings of the sexual politics at work in *Gravity's Rainbow* are typified by Herman and Weisenburger's recent argument that Pynchon's "liberated narrative techniques" ultimately fail to "connect to a politics, a practice, capable of addressing the alienated individualism, the thwarted prospects of nurturing and community, and the deathward trajectory of all the plots *Gravity's Rainbow* otherwise represents. The novel's dark ending gives no hope for such a politics; it gives only song" (166).

By discounting the ending as "only song," Herman and Weisenburger elide the hopeful tone of an earlier song, "Victim in a Vacuum!" Situated about halfway through the novel, this song links queerness with alternate, even hopeful modes of relationality. Addressing "all you masochists out there," "Victim in a Vacuum!" invites them to sing along and "let each other know you're alive and sincere," to "try to break through the

silences, try to reach through and connect. . . .” (Pynchon 421).¹⁶⁶ In this, the song interpellates “you masochists” into a community of narrating agents, whose SM occurs beyond the reach of bureaucratically deployed sexuality. The invitation to claim and narrate one’s SM desires and in doing so gain access to a community of shared pleasure, calls to mind the relation between SM and narrative established in the last chapter: namely, that SM narrative incites further narrative.

In both “Victim in a Vacuum!” and the final song—William Slothrop’s hymn, with which *Gravity’s Rainbow* concludes—direct-address constitutes an invitation to rethink the liberatory potential of nurturing community by positing sexual agency and queer pleasure as a community project with the potential to challenge the alienated individualism described by Herman and Weisenburger. It is particularly significant that these hopeful potentialities rely on individuals producing, joining, and sharing a collective narrative of queer pleasure and community. That both “Victim in a Vacuum!” and queer SM texts invite the production of SM narrative reflects how “metalepsis, the violation of ontological boundaries, [in this case, direct-address] is a model or mirror of love” and sex (McHale, *Postmodernist* 226). Moreover, the refigurative potential of sexual connection expressed by “Victim in a Vacuum!” might even be likened to John Preston’s recollection of the early gay leather scene, in which “the bonding was profound, it was based on having shared raw sex and on the acceptance of raw sex as a desired goal. . . . It took sex as its own ultimate value. It was a reaffirmation of the revolution, not a dilution of it” (*My Life* 127-8). By identifying “raw sex” with the

¹⁶⁶ Unless bracketed, all ellipses are original to Pynchon’s novel.

potential for revolutionary human connection, both the gay leather scene described by Preston and “Victim in a Vacuum!” construct SM as a mode of relationality that rejects the procreative imperative in favor of a pleasure-focused connection within a community occupying the cultural margins.

While I am not suggesting that a queer reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* reveals SM to be a consistent mode of resistance to hegemonic systems of control, I do argue that the text's construction of SM generates a complex intersection of lines of power. An in-depth analysis of SM, pleasure, and sexual agency in *Gravity's Rainbow* suggests that the profusion of explicit sexual scenes in postmodernist novels cannot entirely be construed as a prurient fantasy, as a playful reveling in freedom from censorship, or as merely an expression of postmodern heteroglossia that destabilizes the binary between high and low culture. Rather, it suggests a far more capacious approach to literary categorization in which the importance of sex and sexuality refigures literary history through a pleasure in perversities, linking high and low culture, male and female authors, and postmodern SM with embodied queer practices. Such an approach to post-World War II literature can destabilize the presumed heteromascularity of high postmodernism. Indeed, it allows for a reconsideration of postmodernism in relation to the historically and thematically overlapping proliferation of queer SM pornographies that similarly explore “the transformational and spiritual power of sadomasochism,” which “came because they were outside the precincts of a society that had been ordered for the sake of civil control” (Preston, *My Life* 128-9). Focused attention on Pynchon's SM material reveals how this erotic and narrative practice replicates the text's own discursive structure through embodied sexual pleasure. By considering postmodernist poetics and queerness together,

I demonstrate an as-yet unacknowledged concurrence between these two (narrative) practices—namely, that postmodernist literary devices are enacted in SM, through embodied and vocalized sexual practices.



The relation between postmodernist narrative and queerness is most apparent in the practices of Margherita Erdmann, the sole self-proclaimed female masochist in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Significantly, previous scholarship has overlooked the rise of queer sexual subcultures at the time Pynchon was writing *Gravity's Rainbow*, and in doing so Pynchon studies has obscured the degree to which Margherita's SM functions queerly and how her practices undergird Pynchon's narrative. Indeed, Margherita actively narrates her SM fantasies and practices; as if in response to the hopeful, communitarian potential of "Victim in a Vacuum!", she breaks through the silence by constructing her own SM narratives in an effort to connect with others in embodied pleasure. Margherita's erotic reliance on postmodernist narrative strategies reveals how SM actively frustrates both normative narrativity and narratives of normativity in Pynchon. Applying the positive-productive SM theory developed in this project to Margherita not only reveals how some of Pynchon's SM representations align with the modes of SM discussed in the previous two chapters, but also establishes her as a model of Pynchon's queer-postmodern poetics. In this sense, my return to canonical fiction allows me to further develop the link between SM and narrative that animated the previous chapter's intervention, although a study of canonical literature reveals a slightly different relationship between SM and narrative than that which emerged from my archival research. It is, however, important to point out how my recuperative reading of

Margherita partially draws from antirelational queer theory, such as Halberstam's theorization of masochism as a shadow feminist practice. That Halberstam's work encourages us to look for "forms of agency that do not take the form of resistance" (*Queer Art of Failure* 128) makes this theory particularly useful in the case of Margherita, whose agency has been overlooked by previous scholarship in which Margherita is read as "a woman 'constructed' by male fantasies of woman's sexual pleasure, 'constructed' so effectively as to *be* those fantasies" (Bérubé 264).

Although aspects of Margherita's SM gesture toward a communitarian potential akin to that found in my study of queer SM pornography and culture, some of the narrative aspects of her SM also reveal that SM and queer negativity are in *Gravity's Rainbow* simultaneously symptoms and causes of postmodernist narrative instability. Postmodernist fiction, in McHale's account, emphasizes ontological uncertainty on both the poetic and thematic levels, a destabilizing function that recent theories of queer negativity, like that of Lee Edelman, attributes to queerness (though *No Future* doesn't address SM per se). Edelman's queer negativity disrupts the heteronormative social telos that privileges futurity and reproduction. In part, reading SM as a narrative practice that is central to Pynchon's destabilized, postmodern narrative structure echoes Edelman's insistence that "queerness is structurally antisocial, not empirically so" (Dean, "The Antisocial Homosexual" 827). Significantly, these queer and postmodern forms of disruption align with Thanatz's theorization of Sado-anarchism, which posits that "If S and M could be established universally, at the family level, the State would wither away" (Pynchon 751). Indeed, we find Pynchon's characters resisting the heteronormative narrative that yokes identity with futurity, which enables a refiguration of sexual and

social narratives through queer practices, in this case through the destabilizing narratives of SM. Thanatz's suggestion to universalize SM pleasures might even be read as a suggestion to embrace *jouissance*, "a movement beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the distinctions of pleasure and pain, a violent passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law" (Edelman 25). Thus, this definition of *jouissance* as that which transcends both ontological and epistemological boundaries can also be read as a description of Pynchon's postmodernist poetics. Paralleling Sado-anarchism's subversive impact on the State, the SM sexual practice that permeates the novel causes the narrative to wither away; more specifically, as the far-reaching tendrils of Margherita's SM disperse throughout the text, the novel's narrative teleology appears to dissolve.

In reading some of the stigmatized sexuality in *Gravity's Rainbow* as a form of queer negativity, I highlight a cultural/sexual/political formation that underscores the entire narrative. In part, this attempt builds on Brian McHale's foundational work on postmodernist narratives, particularly his concept of the ontological dominant and his observation that "postmodernist representations of sadomasochism function as models of the 'sadistic' relation between text and reader" (*Postmodernist* 226). My study of Margherita will develop McHale's theorization one step further, arguing that her sexual practice models the sadomasochistic relation between narrative content and structure.

That *No Future* arises from Edelman's polemical extension of "Bersani's hypothesis that tactically it may be 'necessary to accept the pain of embracing, at least provisionally, a homophobic representation of homosexuality'" (Dean, "Queerness, Futurity" 124) makes the concept of queer negativity especially relevant for understanding Pynchon's more fraught representations of SM—specifically, the

coprophagic masochism of Brigadier General Ernest Pudding and the SM practices of Nazi Captain Blicero,¹⁶⁷ which Herman and Weisenburger describe as “obsessional and sadomasochistic hetero- and homosexual rape-tortures” (78). In these two examples we find highly stylized representations of SM based on pornographic clichés that are difficult to assimilate within a positive-productive theory of SM.

The queer politics of these scenes are dubious at best, particularly in real world terms since both scenes unfold under the sign of fascism, despite differing geographical and political situations. However, the queerness of these scenes becomes visible when we consider their resemblance to Edelman’s work, particularly his reappropriation of right-wing homophobic rhetoric. In much the same way, the eroticism of Pudding’s and Blicero’s SM scenes is actually animated by their institutional frameworks, which also provide the material for Pudding’s and Blicero’s attempted acts of resistance. Thus, any queering of Pudding and Blicero’s SM depends—like Edelman’s queer negativity—on the tactical embrace of “a homophobic representation of homosexuality for strategic purposes” and “Edelman’s recommendation that queers take on and, indeed, revel in the negativity with which the homophobic imagination associates us” (Dean, “Queerness, Futurity” 125). Furthermore, the eroticization and literal embrace of the death drive in both Pudding’s and Blicero’s SM further aligns these scenes with the antirelational turn in queer theory. Like Edelman’s polemical version of queer negativity, the fatal outcomes of Pudding’s and Blicero’s SM “do not intend a new politics, a better society, a brighter

¹⁶⁷ Pudding, a World War I veteran who “must be pushing 80” (Pynchon 78), reenlisted in 1940 and was assigned, to his dismay, to PISCES (Psychological Intelligence Schemes for Expediting Surrender), the psychological warfare unit located at The White Visitation. Blicero, a reference to a Germanic folk name for death (from “der bleicher,” which means “‘The Bleacher,’ for what death does to bones” [Weisenburger 37]), is the code name for Nazi Lieutenant, and later Captain, Weissmann.

tomorrow, since all of these fantasies reproduce the past, through displacement in the form of the future” (Edelman 31).

Queering Pudding’s and Blicero’s SM revises previous scholarship that has desexualized Sado-anarchism by reading its association with the death drive solely in satiric terms. These tendencies might be traced back to Lawrence C. Wolfley’s insistence that Sado-anarchism is “compromised by the humor of Thanatz’ motive, and by everything we know about him as a character—his name is an allusion to *Thanatos*, the Freudian term for the death instinct” (877). Wolfley, writing just prior to the AIDS epidemic, could not anticipate the literal ways queerness would be equated with the death instinct, as, for example, in the targeted scapegoating during the 1980s that led New York and San Francisco to permanently close dozens of bathhouses and SM bars, forever changing the embodied experience of queer sociality. Nationally, this reentrenched the association of queerness—and SM more specifically—with death.

Viewing Sado-anarchism through queer negativity reveals what Wolfley couldn’t see at the time: the clever pun of Thanatz’s name need not compromise the politics of Sado-anarchism and might instead reinforce its oppositional potential. Like Wolfley, Pynchon could not have anticipated the specific ways queerness would become associated with the death drive during the AIDS epidemic and how “AIDS has literalized that potential [of the rectum for death] as the certainty of biological death, and has therefore reinforced the heterosexual association of anal sex with self-annihilation” (Bersani, “Rectum” 222). However, it is significant that Pynchon’s representations of homoeroticism and SM reflect the historical tendency to view nonprocreative pleasures as threats to heteronormativity. Pynchon’s linking of SM with narrative disruption and, at

times, with death prefigures the antirelational turn in queer theory; in both, queerness represents the greatest threat to reproducing the dominant social order.

It might seem counterintuitive to deploy two variant approaches to SM in reading a single text; however, doing so reveals the elided complementarity of these two theories. Specifically, antirelational SM theories are most suited to the study of SM's discursive or psychic effects in aestheticized SM representations, while a positive-productive approach is most useful for understanding embodied practices or representations that bear more than a passing resemblance to SM's real world manifestations. A parallel distinction can be made when examining the diversity of SM in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Though this chapter's focus on canonical fiction necessarily means that my analyses of SM are limited to fictionalized representations, it is important to distinguish between Pynchon's highly stylized aestheticizations of SM and those that present SM in more realistic terms. It is precisely such differences that necessitate my use of both antirelational and positive-productive understandings of SM.

In the case of *Gravity's Rainbow*, we find marked differences both in the content and presentation of Margherita's SM, on the one hand, and Pudding's and Blicero's SM, on the other. Margherita's is the only SM scenario that occurs without institutional incitement in the anarchic space of the Zone, which allows her to refashion and explore SM on her own terms.¹⁶⁸ In contrast, neither Pudding's nor Blicero's SM contexts are entirely of their own making. For example, Pudding's masochistic experience is orchestrated by Ned Pointsman, a Pavlovian scientist and director of The White

¹⁶⁸ The Zone refers to occupied Europe after V-E Day, an "open field" that Weisenburger describes as "a geographical slate momentarily wiped clean" (*Companion* 177-8).

Visitation. The origin of Blicero's SM is a little more complicated, as Herman and Weisenburger observe, Blicero's scenes contain "allusions to Germanic folktale, to the deeply romantic and Oedipalized ideology of the *Wandervogel* youth movement that arose in pre-Nazi Germany, and to Rainer Maria Rilke's 1922 book of poems, *Duino Elegies*. . . . These intertexts signal the ways that Weissmann's manias are culturally encoded" (79).

Furthermore, unlike Margherita's SM, Pudding's and Blicero's SM scenes are not strictly structured in realist terms. They are presented as fantasy scenarios Pynchon stages for himself and for us: pornographic thought experiments, if you will. Pudding's scene "assumes the style of classic English pornographic fiction" (Fussell 330), while Blicero's SM reflects "the association of fascism with deviant sexuality and perversity [which] is so well established, so widely assumed, that it surfaces in nearly every genre and has become a cliché in already very cliché-laden genres" (Frost 155), such as pornography. In this sense, they lend themselves all the more readily to queer theorizations of SM that contemporary scholars have developed from studying stylized SM representations (as opposed to cultural or ethnographic study) that do not resemble embodied queer practices.

Specifically, Pudding's and Blicero's fraught SM scenes operate with their own internal fantasy logic, asking us to suspend our disbelief or moral judgments and inviting us to consider this way of thinking about the world, about love, and about desire. We follow these characters into their fantasy spaces, which are clearly demarcated from the rest of the diegetic world: for Pudding there are the antechambers that ultimately lead him to "his real home" (Pynchon 239), the passing through of which induces an altered state

of mind (Pynchon 235); for Blicero, Katje, and Gottfried there is their “game,” sexual re-enactments of the Brothers Grimm fairy-tale “Hansel and Gretel” in which Blicero takes on the role of the witch who threatens the lost children, Katje and Gottfried, with the oven. Blicero’s games occur on the outskirts of a V-2 battery in Holland at a “charmed house in the forest” (Pynchon 99), which becomes their “little Oven-state” (Pynchon 104), “their preserving routine, their shelter, against what outside none of them can bear” (Pynchon 98).

Pudding’s SM is further distanced from the main diegesis by its temporality; specifically, the scene’s dreamlike logic has the effect of transporting Pudding out of the present moment. Through recollections of “mustard gas [. . .] washing in, into his brain with a fatal buzz as dreams will when we don’t want them” (Pynchon 235), Pudding is transported back to the Continent and the battlefields of WWI. Blicero’s SM is not only temporally distant from the main diegesis, but it is mediated through another character’s memory as well; thus the reader only has access to Blicero’s SM through a recollection that is internally focalized in Katje’s mind.¹⁶⁹

Blicero’s SM is further mediated by “nationalist discourses of propaganda and war reportage . . . in which fascism is described as culturally debased and sexually deviant” (Frost 5); indeed, Blicero even names one of his SM scenes “the Rome-Berlin Axis,” when he “is plugged into Gottfried’s upended asshole and the Italian at the same time into his pretty mouth” with Katje “serving [. . .] as human pillow” (Pynchon 96).

Similarly, the various antechambers through which Pudding passes frame his

¹⁶⁹ Katje Borgesius was a double-agent while serving under Blicero in Holland. She was both a member of the Dutch Nazi Party (NSB), who turned over Jewish families to the Nazis, and a spy for the Allies, who fed information about rocket technology to the British. Eventually, the British extract her from the V-2 battery and she begins to work at The White Visitation.

coprophagic masochism through pornographic clichés that are further mediated (i.e. de-individuated) by their association with stigmatizing, medical discourse. For example, Pudding’s nightly ritual includes references to a Malacca cane, a common instrument for corporal punishment in Victorian literature; a coffee tin that’s branded “Savarin” though Pudding “understands that it means to say ‘Severin’” (Pynchon 234), the protagonist of Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch’s classic erotic novel of male masochism, *Venus in Furs* (1870); and Krafft-Ebing, the influential sexologist who coined the terms sadism and masochism from the pornographic works of the Marquis de Sade and Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch in *Psycopathia Sexualis* (1886). While one could argue that Margherita’s SM is equally mediated—indeed, previous scholarship finds that Margherita “has no identity beyond the [pornographic film] roles she plays” (Kaufman 222)—my reading will demonstrate how such claims obscure female sexual agency and disregard the absence of mediation in Margherita’s Zone scenes, which significantly differs from the framing of Pudding’s and Blicero’s SM in which mediation is a dominant component.

Indeed, both Pudding’s and Blicero’s scenes are further distanced from the diegetic world by the cinematic frame that precedes each. In the case of Pudding, a scientist at The White Visitation imagines the lab rats—transformed to human size—springing from their enclosures to sing and dance “down the long aisles and metal apparatus, with conga drums and a peppy tropical orchestra” (Pynchon 232), performing a farcical musical number that appears to be shot “from overhead, from a German camera-angle” (Pynchon 232). Similarly, the internal focalization that contains Blicero’s SM begins with Katje being filmed at The White Visitation, a “camera records no change

in her face” (Pynchon 95), though as she stares at her reflection in the mirror, she “also feels a cameraman’s pleasure, but knows what he cannot” (Pynchon 96).

As in pornography more generally, the framing of Pudding’s and Blicero’s SM scenes suspends both the law and the rules of realism in the diegetic world, thus bracketing off questions of consent within the fictional context and allowing Pynchon to explore such erotic relations for what they are: a stigmatized but potentially powerful mode of relationality. In realist terms, there is no question that Katje, Gottfried, and, to a certain extent, Pudding are victims without the power to consent, but in this pornographic fantasy scenario, Pynchon explores the implications of their complicitous pleasures.

It might seem counterintuitive to selectively read Margherita’s scenes in realist terms through a theory developed from embodied SM practices, particularly given the weight I place on establishing her sexual agency vis-à-vis consent and pleasure. Indeed, this approach stands in stark contrast to my queering of Blicero’s and Pudding’s SM scenes, which I argue needn’t be subjected to the same legal and ethical standards. The text itself, however, encourages this type of differentiation. The wildly variant framing of each scene gives rise to different agency conditions: Margherita achieves a level of (narrative) agency unmatched by any other sadomasochist in the text. Margherita’s sexual agency is underscored by readers’ direct access to the SM narratives she constructs in the novel’s primary diegesis, which lends her SM an air of realism—at least relatively. Thus, the narrative presentation of Pudding’s and Blicero’s SM scenes encourages my use of a theory (i.e. antirelational understandings of SM) that is best suited to SM’s aestheticized representations, while the more straight-forward presentation of Margherita’s scenes, along with readers’ less mediated access to her SM, accounts for my more realistic

treatment of her sexual practices and their alignment with SM's positive-productive potential.

In part, this chapter's deployment of both antirelational and positive-productive SM theories builds from Tim Dean's critiques of the antisocial thesis. Of particular importance is Dean's claim that "queerness, though it fissures the norm from within, does not simply negate futurity but, rather, unfolds incalculable futures by means of a vastly subtler set of determinations—a set that," Dean argues, "remains irreducible to the terms of either reproduction or negation" ("Queerness, Futurity" 128). By modeling how these two approaches can be reconciled, I take up Dean's observation that Bersani's readers have missed a key point: the foundational antirelational thesis established in *Homos* is "but the first step in Bersani's account of relationality. The second, correlative step is to trace new forms of sociability, new ways of being together, that are not grounded in imaginary identity or the struggle for intersubjective recognition" (Dean, "The Antisocial Homosexual" 827).

Other theorists have expanded Dean's critique of the antisocial thesis and interrogated the terms of the debate. For example, Mari Ruti demonstrates how Edelman's theory ignores Lacan's later work and the evolution of his thinking about *jouissance* to include its potentially creative effects. She is particularly critical of "Edelman's decision to read the antisociality of eros as uncompromisingly destructive, without any recognition of the possibility that erotic surrender can lead to subjective renewal" (Ruti 121). Ruti attributes this elision to Žižek's influence on a certain strain of posthumanist thought that, as in the case of Edelman's work, "fail[s] to see the signifier as a site of innovative energy and regard[s] it, instead, as a mere tool of hegemonic

power” (122). Indeed, Dean identifies a similar tendency in antirelational theories that elide “Foucault’s thesis on power’s omnipresence [which] points to the micro-conflicts that constitute social relations, showing how every vector of relationality may be regarded as an axis of potential struggle in which no party ever is deprived entirely of power (or of what has come to be called agency)” (Dean, “Queerness, Futurity” 138-9).

Parallel tendencies can be found in discussions of SM in Pynchon studies, which generally do not explore the discrepancies amongst Pynchon’s SM representations or the fraught complexity in individual instances of SM. While the State’s co-optation of sexuality has been extensively discussed in Pynchon scholarship, the institutional trappings of such scenes have obscured another significant truth. *Gravity’s Rainbow* is equally concerned with how State co-optations are complicated by characters who reappropriate their institutionally defined roles. Indeed, Foucault’s claims about the multi-directional operations of power that he likens to “the structure of the spiral, in which power and pleasure are interwoven” (Dean, “Biopolitics of Pleasure” 481) clarify how Pudding and Blicero attempt disruption, despite their imbrication in State power. Queerness’s centrality to Pynchon’s narrative structure and his construction of queerness as a fraught site of opposition establish the importance of taking seriously Pynchon’s representations of sex and gender. Pynchon’s SM can be understood as the point where characters’ queer, nonnormative tendencies intersect with the nonnormative narrative tendencies of the text.



Before diving into my close-readings of Pynchon’s SM episodes, I offer a brief sketch of how these scenes are contextualized within the novel’s overarching storylines

and, more importantly, how the SM episodes are themselves intertwined. Although the narrative ping-pongs through time and geographic locations from the island of Mauritius in the seventeenth century to Los Angeles around 1970, the narrative primarily takes place in Europe between December 1944 and September 1945. As much as *Gravity's Rainbow*—with its more than 400 characters—can be said to have a protagonist, we find it in Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop, an American with “nine generations of Puritan ancestors” who grew up in Massachusetts (Weisenburger 30).¹⁷⁰ Slothrop is assigned by Allied intelligence agencies (both fictional and non-fictional) with learning everything available about Germany's V-2 rocket program—not only because of the V-2's unique technology—“the V-2 travels faster than sound, its ‘screaming’ uncannily *following* its deadly blast” (Herman and Weisenburger 2)—but also because the V-2 rockets appear to be falling across London in a pattern that corresponds with the sites of Slothrop's sexual liaisons, which he records with colored stars on a map.

Although the many plot threads of this encyclopedic novel are difficult to distill into a single, coherent plot, *Gravity's Rainbow* is loosely centered around the quest for a specific V-2 rocket marked by the serial number 00000. Unlike other V-2's, Rocket 00000 is said to contain a mysterious device called the Schwarzgerät or S-gerät (“black device” or “black box”). The mystery of 00000's S-gerät drives a great deal of the plot's machinations and Slothrop's journey across Europe; indeed, Slothrop will learn he is not alone in his quest and his travels are spent alternately seeking help from and evading other interested parties.

¹⁷⁰ Pynchon too is “‘nine or ten generations’ removed from his ancestors, John Pynchon (1626-1702) of Springfield, Massachusetts, and William Pynchon (1590-1662), founder of Springfield and Roxbury. William was a patentee and treasurer of the Massachusetts Bay Company and author of theological treatises ruled heretical by Puritan divines” (Weisenburger 34).

Through flashbacks, we learn that Rocket 00000 is the pet project of Blicero, Captain of a Nazi V-2 battery in Holland where he has taken Gottfried, a young soldier, and Katje, a Dutch double-agent, as his sexual slaves; indeed, Katje's recollection of Blicero's SM games are the first glimpse we get of his power mania, which is one of the primary driving forces of the plot. After the British extract Katje from Holland in late December 1944, she continues her intelligence work—again in a sexual capacity—at The White Visitation, where her Dominatrix performance is used to distract an aging brigadier.

As institutional interest in Slothrop and his connection to the rocket increases, he is sent to the Continent where The White Visitation contrives a “cute meet” between Slothrop and Katje. Sensing a conspiracy and fearing for his liberty, Slothrop goes AWOL to continue his search for Rocket 00000. During his travels—from Monaco and Nice to Zurich and Geneva and all across Germany and Holland—he takes on a variety of aliases including “Ian Scuffling” (an English war correspondent), “Raketemensch” or “Rocketman,” “Plechazunga” or “Pig Hero” (a fictional Germanic folk character), and “Max Schlepzig” (a famous German actor who shared the screen with Margherita Erdmann). Stumbling into a dilapidated movie studio in Neubabelsberg, Slothrop meets Margherita, who is on her own quest in search of her daughter Bianca. Over the course of a few weeks in July 1945 they travel from Berlin across occupied Germany, making their way toward the Baltic Sea. Along the way, Margherita will educate Slothrop in the pleasures of SM, in scenes that function less as pornographic asides and more as an extension of Slothrop's on-going study of the interweaving of power, pleasure, and violence. Eventually, they board the *Anubis*, where Slothrop will meet Margherita's

husband, Miklos Thanatz. While aboard the *Anubis* Slothrop learns that, months earlier—in Spring 1945—Margherita and Thanatz came under the control of Blicero on the Lüneburg Heath as he prepared to launch Rocket 00000. During this time, Blicero uses Margherita as a model for a strange, erotic costume made of a mysterious black polymer, Imipolex G, described as “the material of the future” (Pynchon 496). Separated from Thanatz, Margherita is then ejected from the Nazi facility and left naked in the Zone to fend for herself.

It is this “exotic costume of some black polymer, very tight at the waist, open at the crotch” (Pynchon 496), that Gottfried wears when he is entombed in Rocket 00000, the launching of which culminates Blicero’s sadomasochistic games. However, much of this information is withheld until the novel’s final episode, which takes us months back in time from September 1945 to Easter 1945 and Gottfried’s sacrificial launch in Rocket 00000. This narrative construction means that the novel’s action—the myriad quests to solve the mystery of 00000 and its S-gerät—is represented after the fact, much like the “aural paradox” of the V-2 which can only be “known . . . [by] the surviving neighbors of the already ghostly dead” (Herman and Weisenburger 2). Thus, each of the scenes analyzed below has a direct connection to the novel’s ostensible protagonist, its primary plot line, and its central symbol—the V-2 rocket, which itself becomes emblematic of sadomasochistic erotics.

PUDDING’S COPROPHAGIA

From the outset of Pudding’s SM scene, its institutional framework is apparent: Pointsman uses SM to distract the aging Pudding, render him ineffectual, and prevent his

interference with PISCES. “Pudding will not go back on any of his commitments,” according to Pointzman; “we have made arrangements with him. The details aren’t important” (Pynchon 231). However, the text contradicts that, describing at length Pudding’s ritual submission to Katje. Since Pudding’s death from an *E. coli* infection fulfills Pointzman’s wish to gain control of PISCES, attributing a queer, disruptive agency to Pudding’s masochism might seem questionable. Though I deal at length with this objection, it’s worth noting here the narrative emphasis on Pudding’s desire for and pleasure in sexual masochism—which establishes at least a degree of sexual agency and makes Pudding’s queer negativity more significant than a mere happy accident for Pointzman.

The narrative’s internal focalization through Pudding reveals his desire to submit (“please . . . please let her accept . . .” [Pynchon 236]), his earnest devotion (“he loves to listen to her speak” [Pynchon 237]), and his hope “to stay a while longer with his submissive tongue straining upward into her asshole” (Pynchon 239)—all pleasures that he seems to experience independently of Pointzman’s motives. Pudding even expands the fantasy narrative that Pointzman constructs. When consuming Katje’s excrement, Pudding thinks “of a Negro’s penis, yes he knows it abrogates part of the conditions set, but it will not be denied, the image of a brute African who will make him behave” (Pynchon 238). One could argue that this fantasy isn’t any more outside Pudding’s socially conditioned desires than the scenario Pointzman orchestrates; however, the repeated interweaving of race, power, and sexuality across a variety of characters of different national origins (manifested, for example, in Margherita’s story about “Negro MPs”—which will be discussed later—and Slothrop’s sodium amytal vision of the

Roseland Ballroom) seems to indicate less about Pudding's conditioning and more about Pynchon and the context in which he wrote *Gravity's Rainbow*—a moment defined by social shifts linked to the civil rights and liberationist movements. More than an indication of any single character's relation to race or further evidence of sexual conditioning in the West, this motif can be taken as a commentary on the West's haunting legacy of colonialism and chattel slavery and its similarity to the racial ideologies of fascism (Herman and Weisenburger 195). In part, the queerness of Pudding's desire distinguishes the black man of his fantasy from more common racist stereotypes like the idea that "black men were uncivilized, unmanly rapists" who "lusted uncontrollably after white women" (Bederman 46). Although Pudding's fantasy portrays the African as savage and sexually virile—in line with racist fantasies and fears of black masculinity and of miscegenation—his fantasy diverges from racist discourse in that Pudding overtly desires to worship, to be penetrated by, and to be made to behave for this man.¹⁷¹ More significantly, such details reveal how the fantasy operates subversively within the narrative: it "abrogates" the set conditions by inserting homosexual, interracial desire into Pointsman's ritual, further indicating the extent to which Pudding's sexuality is outside the normative. Pudding's homoerotic desires manifest vis-à-vis coprophagia, reinforcing the link between Pudding and the pleasures of queer abjection.¹⁷² By using masochism in

¹⁷¹ It would also be possible to read the racialized aspects of Pudding's masochistic fantasy through Frantz Fanon's discussion of European male masochism in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). For an expansion of Fanon's observations about masochism, see John K. Noyes's *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism* (1997) in which he discusses the role of guilt and how "the instances of colonial masochism [Fanon] discusses show how the inherently sadistic and exploitative relation of European males to their African colonial subjects becomes eroticized" (Noyes 110).

¹⁷² For an extended discussion of interracial homoeroticism and the subversive (queer) potential in embracing the abject, see Darieck Scott's *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African-American Literary Imagination* (2010).

ways Pointsman doesn't anticipate, Pudding disrupts and counteracts the institutional deployment of sexuality as a means of controlling and regulating individuals: he takes for himself the pleasures of playing with power, pleasures that—according to Thanatz—should be reserved for the State.

Aside from how Pudding's fantasy disrupts the institutional co-optation of sexuality, it is worth considering how Pudding's masochistic practice, specifically his coprophagia, can be likened to the productive potential that is implicit in Bersani's antirelational thesis: masochism functions queerly as an ego-shattering force, and in doing so, it has the potential to usher in new futures. Specifically, Bersani's analysis of Jean Genet's *Funeral Rites*, explores how rimming, and then coprophagia, "turns out to be just as suggestive aesthetically as it is ethically" (*Homos* 178). Bersani explains that Genet, having eaten his lover's waste, "expels him as a world of new images" (*Homos* 179). In Genet, Bersani finds a reversal of terms—"the anus produces life, waste is fecund, from death new landscapes emerge" (*Homos* 179)—reversals that are only possible "after the entire field of resignifying potentialities has been devastated" (*Homos* 179). A similar reversal of terms appears in Pynchon's description of the fecal matter that Pudding consumes: "bread that would only have floated in porcelain waters somewhere, unseen, untasted—risen now and baked in the bitter intestinal Oven to bread we know, bread that's light as domestic comfort, secret as death in bed . . ." (Pynchon 238). Likewise, the text's primary symbol—the V-2 rocket—is defined by its unique reversal of terms, the sound after the blast; in fact, *Gravity's Rainbow* is permeated by such

reversals, and “many of the really madcap fantasies in *Gravity’s Rainbow* unfold under the sign of hysteron proteron” (Herman and Weisenburger 169).¹⁷³

By finding value in waste, Bersani connects rimming and coprophagia with world-making creativity; specifically he explains how “in a society where oppression is structural, constitutive of sociality itself, only what that society throws off—its mistakes or its pariahs can serve the future” (*Homos* 180). Bersani links the revolutionary and productive potential of rimming with creative power, both artistic and demiurgic, by reading such acts as a mode of sublimation that “is an activity of consciousness accompanying a particular sexual activity, indeed lasting no longer than that activity” (*Homos* 179). In much the same way, Pudding’s coprophagia allows him to be “momentarily rescued from the phony paper war he’s now engaged in, reinstalled in his familiar original world of ‘vertigo, nausea, and pain’” (Fussell 333). In essence, Pudding’s activities free him from the world of signification as he momentarily returns to corporeality. On a meta-level, Pudding’s consumption of waste operates much like Genet’s in that it gives birth to new modes of artistic expression. Specifically, this type of explicit pornographic material in Pynchon becomes “capable of revealing for the first time the full obscenity of the Great War” and of war more generally (Fussell 334).

Pudding’s unanticipated fantasies also bear out Foucault’s assertion that power is always being exerted from both the top and bottom; here “top/bottom” can be read in terms of its traditional social signification (i.e., hegemonic institutions of power/individuals), as well as in terms of the SM binary of dominant/submissive or

¹⁷³ “Hysteron proteron” refers to “a trope of backward motion, regression, and reversals of cause and effect” (Weisenburger 34).

active/passive sexual roles.¹⁷⁴ Like Foucault, Pynchon identifies sexuality as a disciplinary regime that contains within it the potential to disrupt binary meaning-making systems: Katje, once subservient to Blicero, now wields the power of the sadist, inverting both the binary of dominator/dominated and a patriarchal gender binary that assumes female subservience and associates femininity with the passive/receptive role in intercourse. The novel highlights the multivalent functions of sexuality within society by linking this deconstruction of binary power and language to Pudding's masochistic pleasure.

Additionally, Pudding's queering of history and unanticipated fantasies demonstrate how queer sexual practices "gum up the works of the normative structures we call family and nation, gender, race, class, and sexual identity, by changing tempos, by remixing memory and desire" in order to "jam *whatever* looks like the inevitable" (Freeman 173)—which could just as easily apply to Pynchon's own disruption of narrative inevitability. Pudding's internal fantasies—shifting between his memories of Domina Nocturna on the World War I battlefield and his present interaction with Katje playing Domina Nocturna as a dominatrix—evoke a queer temporality in which the past is not treated as stable. Similarly, Pynchon's encyclopedic novel incorporates the historical fiction genre, revising and "debunking the orthodox version of the past" and "transform[ing] the conventions and norms of historical fiction itself" (McHale, *Postmodernist* 91). This "paranoiac mode of secret history" manifests in apocryphal history, creative anachronism, and historical fantasy (*Postmodernist* 92). When

¹⁷⁴ As discussed in the previous chapters and in theories of SM more generally, SM is particularly useful for exploring power's multidirectionality, since the dominant exercises power only at the will of the submissive.

supplementing the historical record, apocryphal history “operates in the ‘dark areas’ of history, apparently in conformity to the norms of ‘classic’ historical fiction but in fact *parodying* them” (*Postmodernist* 91). Pudding’s ritual of recounting and refiguring World War I history with Katje draws from the official facts and supplements them with personal experience. The narrative context in which Pudding and Katje queer and revise World War I history is itself located in the larger apocryphal history of *Gravity’s Rainbow* and its narration of the “dark areas” of history that parodies World War II historical fiction. Like the postmodernist historical revisions from which it is impossible to draw a “final conclusion” (*Postmodernist* 92) and within which Pudding’s SM is situated, Pudding’s queer temporality frustrates normativity, “gumming up” institutional power strategies and readers’ interpretive strategies.¹⁷⁵

Indeed, sexuality—its representations, its pleasures, its narration—structures Pynchon’s postmodern world. The uniquely queer treatment of time and history in Pudding’s SM narrative mirrors the broader postmodernist strategies of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Pudding’s SM accesses queer temporality in terms of its content while also foregrounding the tension between the world according to official historical archives and one “radically dissimilar” to that: “the tension between these two versions induces a form of ontological flicker between the two “ (McHale, *Postmodernist* 91), an ontological flicker that will be repeated when Pudding dies.

The episode ends with Pudding’s reflection that he has nothing to look forward to except paperwork and “a dose of penicillin that Pointsman has ordered him to take, to

¹⁷⁵ I offer a more extended discussion of how Pudding serves as a stand-in for readers’ interpretive frustrations—how he functions as a model of the modernist reader confronting a postmodernist text—in “Queer Sex, Queer Text: SM in *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” which will be published in *Thomas Pynchon, Sex, and Gender* (2018).

combat the effects of *E. coli*. Perhaps, though, tomorrow night . . . perhaps then. He can't see how he can hold out much longer. But perhaps, in the hours just before dawn . . .” (Pynchon 239). For Pudding, “holding out” becomes synonymous with a passive endorsement of the System’s wartime surveillance methods that he vocally opposed; thus, he imagines his own death as a method of opting out of this endorsement and of his daily military routine. We will learn that he “died back in the middle of June of a massive *E. coli* infection, whining, at the end, ‘Me little Mary hurts . . .’ over and over. It was just before dawn, as he had wished” (Pynchon 542). Through this act of resistance—“forgetting” to take his penicillin—Pudding escapes the political structures that attempt to control him through their deployment of sexuality. Like Foucault’s observation that “where there is power, there is resistance” (*History* 95), Pudding subverts and resists institutional power through the very means the System used to exert control.

One could argue that Pudding’s fatal SM allows the institutional deployment of sexuality to succeed by enabling it to interminably protect itself from Pudding’s meddling; however, such a claim would go against a great deal of Pynchon scholarship surrounding Tyrone Slothrop’s fate, which has been read as a mode of disruption. Indeed, critics have seen the dissolution of Slothrop’s subjectivity as a rare moment when the evasion of power at least marginally succeeds. Even more than Slothrop’s “minimalist claim of negative freedom, deeply alienated and individuated” (Herman and Weisenburger 212), Pudding’s evasion of Their System should be taken as a valid mode of resistance because, like other queerness in the novel, it becomes associated with communitarian potential: Pudding’s pleasures are linked to a broader history of SM desires and communities by the multiplicity of literary and cultural allusions to SM’s

history found in the antechambers he passes through.¹⁷⁶ Although I already articulated how such references mediate—and thus distance—Pudding’s SM from the types of embodied experiences discussed in previous chapters, it’s worth acknowledging the plasticity of Pynchon’s allusions, since they might also be read—as I read them here—as a way of connecting Pudding with a history of marginalization, a burden that Pudding shares with other SM practitioners. In this sense, the references to medicalized discourse simultaneously frame Pudding’s SM through stigmatizing clichés, while also suggesting common historical experiences, even if they are not explicitly sexual.

The encyclopedic compendium of sexological “perversions” documented aboard the *Anubis*, which I will discuss later, and the ironically named song “Victim in a Vacuum!” also reveal how *Gravity’s Rainbow* persistently signals SM’s—and, more broadly, queerness’s—communitarian potential. Slothrop’s fate, unlike Pudding’s, is not directly tied to communitarian queer sexual practices that (attempt to) subvert the institutional deployment of sexuality. Furthermore, in Slothrop’s case, institutional power actively pursues his sexual nonnormativity as a locus of secret knowledge; indeed, the madcap pursuit of Slothrop’s prophetic erections parodically anticipates Foucault’s claims about how society has put “into operation an entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning” sexuality, since “it suspected sex of harbouring a fundamental secret” (Foucault, *History* 69); whereas Pudding’s proclivities are of limited use, benefiting Pointsman alone. After Slothrop’s disappearance the narrative offers no “direct discourse telling his whereabouts, actions, thoughts, and reasons” (Herman and

¹⁷⁶ This goes against previous readings of SM in Pynchon, which argue that characters’ retreats to private fantasies leave them vulnerable to “the tyranny of a wider social agency” (Hamill 53).

Weisenburger 230), limiting readers' ability to form hypotheses. In contrast, Pudding reappears late in the narrative as a spiritual member of the Counterforce whose "devotion to culinary pranksterism" inspires "the repulsive stratagem" (Pynchon 729) "by which Mexico and Bodine escape the machinations of the VIPs" (Schlegel 174). Thus, we cannot write off the significance of Pudding's fatal SM practice any more than we can disregard Slothrop's famed escape.

By choosing to die, Pudding literalizes the subversive potential of queer negativity. He refuses to participate in the construction of a social fiction, a refusal that the text's discursive level reflects by emphasizing the "tension between modes of intelligibility and the apparently unintelligible" (McHale, *Constructing* 73). Pudding, like Pynchon's text, frustrates normative narratives and futurity by transgressing the illusory boundary between dominator and dominated, between social subject and unintelligible subjectivity, or more accurately, between social subject and the nonsubjectivity that results from an embrace of queer negativity taken to its logical extreme. Pudding uses sexuality to transgress the boundary between heteronormative and queer, between life and death.

BLICERO'S GAMES

Perhaps more than any other part of the text, the Hansel and Gretel episode¹⁷⁷ focalizes the complexities of power's operations and the fraught potential for subversion that inheres in Pynchon's representations of queerness. We see this particularly in the

¹⁷⁷ The narrative analepsis in which Katje and Gottfried submit to Blicero is thematically framed by allusions to "*Der Kinderofen*" (Pynchon 96), "a reference to the German folktale 'Hansel and Gretel'" (Weisenburger, *Companion* 74). The analepsis takes place at Schußstelle 3, a V-2 battery in Holland (Pynchon 97).

slippage between Blicero's political power and sexual pleasure, between his desire to access and wield power and his masochistic pleasure in abdicating power. This slippage is illuminated by the concept of "disidentification," theorized by Michel Pêcheux in *Language, Semantics and Ideology* and expanded upon in terms of queer theory by Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter*. Although José Esteban Muñoz's work has extended this concept the most, his elaboration of disidentification in terms of queer of color critique would make its application to a Nazi character somewhat problematic, to say the least. Therefore, I am primarily using the term in its broader sense and less in the sense of Muñoz's significant and influential work in *Disidentifications* (1999). In both Butler and Pêcheux the subject is always constructed as "*inside* ideology" (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 12). In their work we find models of disidentification that "permit one to examine theories of a subject who is neither the 'Good Subject,' who has an easy or magical identification with dominant culture, or the 'Bad Subject,' who imagines herself outside of ideology. Instead they pave the way to an understanding of a 'disidentificatory subject' who tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form" (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 12). In much the same way, Blicero's anxiety about successfully performing the role of a Nazi officer is rooted in the dialectical tension between Aryan masculinism and homosexual and sadomasochistic desires.

Blicero relies on his military power to explore his queer desires and in doing so he both reifies and disrupts the manifestation and uses of that power. Although queer, Blicero has not been interpellated by the state with that "injurious" label, and thus his disidentification is not with the stigmatized subject position of queerness, but rather with the majoritarian identity accepted by the state. The strictures of his institutionally defined

role give rise to his disidentification with a state-sanctioned identity that cannot accommodate his queerness. Specifically, Blicero partially undermines his Nazi identity through parody, namely, his cross-dressing, gender-bending dominatrix performance. Although Blicero's disruptions occur primarily on the discursive level, they operate materially through drag, which foregrounds gender binaries as social constructs and, in Blicero's case, replaces them with the dominator/dominated binary. By translating the bureaucratic power of his Nazi rank into that of a parodic dominatrix, Blicero's feminized sexual practice works against the Nazi privileging of hetero- and homomascularity, his campy costume actively mocking the privileged gender position.

Despite the tacit sanctioning of certain modes of homoeroticism among the Nazi elite, Blicero's drag can be read as a subversive disidentificatory performance, since it was primarily "the masculine homosexual [who] was in complete concordance with the state's anti-Semitic and misogynistic conceptions of masculinity and femininity" (Halberstam, *Queer Art* 160). Blicero presents himself in "Cuban heels, his penis squashed invisible under a flesh-colored leather jockstrap, over which he wears a false cunt and merkin of sable," and "tiny blades of stainless steel bristle from lifelike pink humidity" (Pynchon 96-7), crushing the symbol of male power beneath artificial—and weaponized—female genitalia. In heteronormative society, the cunt is constructed as a symbol of weakness because of its vulnerability to penetration; *Gravity's Rainbow* inverts this symbol of female difference and disempowerment. Rather than being penetrated, the steel bristles of Blicero's cunt penetrate Katje's "lips and tongue" bloodying them and reinforcing her subjugation (Pynchon 97). Through his aggressively sexualized drag, Blicero disidentifies with the Nazi privileging of hypermasculinity while

simultaneously using this disidentificatory performance to sexualize and feminize the power associated with his military rank. Ironically, this Nazi rank is what empowers him to play out the queer desires that should ostensibly exclude him from the Nazi regime, which implemented the targeted enslavement and genocide of homosexuals in the camps. Any disidentificatory subversion problematically relies on Blicero's interpellation as a Nazi officer and his willingness to exploit that sovereign power for his own (queer) ends. In this sense Blicero foregrounds the complexity at work in Pynchon's SM material which teeters back and forth between surprisingly progressive representations of queerness that align with community understandings of SM and those other moments when Pynchon lapses into pornographic cliché.

As an officer, Blicero can sacrifice his people for the Aryan cause or his own erotic pleasure. Yet despite his military rank, he remains aware of his waning physical and political power as the war nears its end; that he can no longer die a hero's death is deeply frustrating to him (Pynchon 101). Blicero's fraught relationship with Fascist power and his inability to embody the idealized Nazi leads to disidentificatory performances that reject Aryan masculinism and its glorification of youths like Gottfried who represent the future figured in the fetishization of the child in the heteronormative narrative. Gottfried is a symbol of the heteronormative system that by the war's end will condemn the aging Blicero to a slow decline.

Exploiting wartime ontological instability, Blicero redefines Gottfried's sense of subjectivity. His power over Gottfried, who "kneel[s] naked except for a studded dog collar, masturbating metronomic, at shouted commands from Captain Blicero" (Pynchon 97) calls to mind Foucauldian notions of sexuality as discursive constructs through which

power operates, as opposed to stable and innate drives (*History* 103). The discursive construction of sexuality as a transfer point in power relations renders subjects perpetually open to reconstruction. By removing Gottfried from the army barracks to the cottage, Blicero removes Gottfried from the bureaucratic structure that defined the boy's subjectivity and replaces it with SM. Through SM, Blicero strips Gottfried of the privileged subject position that the Aryan glorification of youth has bestowed on him and that is vested in the child by heteronormative ideology.

However, for Gottfried, “the fucking [. . .], the stinging chastisements, his face reflected in the act of kissing the Captain's boots [. . .] make specific his captivity, which otherwise would hardly be different from Army stifling, Army repression” (Pynchon 105), the phrase “Army repression” ironically suggesting that this scenario—Gottfried's sexual enslavement—endows him with the freedom to explore modes of sexual pleasure that the System cannot accommodate, primarily because such pleasures are untethered from accepted sexual subjectivities. As Larry Townsend suggests in *The Leatherman's Handbook* (1972), “S & M activities are the most uninhibited behavioral situations in which you are ever likely to find yourself. Carrying this to its next logical degree, I think it's legitimate to ask. . . . Is this the real you?” (126). Indeed, it is in Blicero's game that Gottfried feels “at true ease” (Pynchon 105). While Townsend's claim that SM sex is the most uninhibited behavioural situation is certainly debatable, his linking of SM with a notion of one's authentic self (“the real you”) appears again and again in myriad practitioner-produced SM texts, as well as in the ecstatic pleasure of identification expressed repeatedly in letters to Samois and Townsend. Here then, despite the institutional constraints, Pynchon appears to acknowledge SM as an authentic and

pleasurable mode of sexual expression through which individuals can gain new insights about themselves.

In more realist terms, Gottfried's choice between "Army repression" and Blicero appears as a choice between two evils, two modes of imprisonment. And yet it's framed far more ambivalently by Pynchon, who uses Gottfried's internal focalization to reveal the pleasure and tenderness he feels and the pride he takes in his new life, which seems preferable to army monotony, hinting at how "SM is *the use* of a strategic relationship as a source of pleasure (physical pleasure)" (Foucault, "Sex, Power" 388). In Blicero's hands, Gottfried's stable and State-defined identity disappears, along with his ontological stability (which was already threatened by the war), leaving his body and identity open to penetration and his own innovative exploration. Here then, we have a prime example of how masochism's ego-shattering force "might be a powerful weapon in the struggle against the disciplinarian constraints of identity" (*Homos* 101), particularly for how these discursive disruptions enable "the movement from self-shattering to self-extension (or, put otherwise, from the antirelational to proliferating relational possibilities)" (Dean, "Sex and the Aesthetics of Existence" 391).

For Foucault, "the deployment of sexuality has its reason for being . . . in proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating and *penetrating* bodies" (*History* 107, emphasis added), an idea highlighted in *Gravity's Rainbow* when Blicero reminds Gottfried of his initial resistance and then acceptance of anal sex: "how tight you were. Until you knew I meant to come inside. Your little rosebud bloomed. You had nothing, not even your mouth's innocence, to lose . . ." (Pynchon 106). By linking subjectivity to discursive structures, the narrative initiates a slippage between embodied and discursively

constructed subjectivity; destabilizing one necessarily leads to the destabilization of the other, reflecting a tenuous ontology on both the storyworld and discursive levels.

This queer ontological disruption on both levels of the text completes its arc in the novel's final episode, when SM's ritual aspects are interwoven with the ritualized firing of Rocket 00000. Nestled into the rocket's tail section, Gottfried recalls his own "eyes pleading, gagged throat trying to say too late what he should have said in the tent last night . . . deep in the throat, the gullet, where Blicero's own cock's head has burst for the last time" (Pynchon 773). Here, Blicero's queer pleasure—and perhaps Gottfried's as well—prevents the production of intelligible narrative and in doing so, blocks Gottfried's access to futurity. In this sense, we find a literalization of what Edelman's polemic theorizes solely in abstract terms: queerness blocks signification and the reproduction of narrative telos. Pynchon's ellipsis makes visible this absence of signification: the narrator does not indicate what Gottfried should or would have said had his mouth been unoccupied.

The sentence's structure juxtaposes Gottfried's unarticulated thoughts with his penetrated throat; between them, in place of articulation, is only an ellipsis. This queer frustration of language, meaning, and narrative reflects the postmodernist equating of "life with discourse, death with silence" (McHale, *Postmodernist* 228). As a result of fellating Blicero, Gottfried is silenced; unable, or unwilling, to vocally resist Blicero's narrative, he will die. Though a radio speaker was implanted in Gottfried's ear, allowing him to hear Blicero, "there's no return channel from Gottfried to the ground. The exact moment of his death will never be known" (Pynchon 766). These silences are replicated in the text's structure, which stops short of depicting Gottfried's death, further

demonstrating how Pynchon uses SM on both the storyworld and discursive levels to destabilize the ultimate ontological boundary between life and death.

During the launch of 00000, Blicero calls out German commands. The narrator indicates how “there ought to be big dramatic pauses here [. . .]. But no, the ritual has its velvet grip on them all. So strong, so warm . . .” (Pynchon 773). Yet the text’s structure undercuts its content; in this section, entitled “The Clearing,” each call and response is separated by lengthy descriptions of setting and detailed dialogue tags, suspending and slowing narrative progression. After the first stage is initiated with the press of a button, there is “a pause of 15 seconds while the oxygen tank comes up to pressure,” and then after ignition, “[t]here is a period of four seconds [. . .], four seconds of indeterminacy. The ritual even has a place for that” (Pynchon 773). Here, the narrator emphasizes the importance of these pauses to the ritual launching of Rocket 00000—the terminal, fatal gratification of pleasure toward which Blicero and Gottfried were heading from the beginning. Here, Blicero’s sadistic ritual reveals how “somasochism plays with and literalizes power *as* time,” as Elizabeth Freeman puts it, making “the pause itself corporeal” (153). The discursive structure of the 00000 launch models Sadean temporality by slowing down narrative time for both the extradiegetic reader and Gottfried, reflecting how the relation between text and reader is, according to McHale, a reenactment of the SM relationship, particularly in its “*modeling* of erotic relations through foregrounded violations of ontological boundaries” (*Postmodernist* 227). Like Sade, Pynchon draws on philosophical (and scientific) treatises and includes an excessive amount of detail that extends and suspends the erotic scene, creating a discursive structure and narrative that seemingly produce an endless deferral of gratification. The

text's queer, erotic structure—extending beyond individual instances of SM—is foregrounded by the Sadean pause's reappearance during the novel's conclusion when the rocket is left hovering, its arc incomplete.

Though the launching of 00000 is the climax of Blicero's SM practice, it is not the conclusion of his narrative arc. Prior to describing 00000's launch, the narrator reads "Weissmann's Tarot": "look among the successful academics, the Presidential advisers, the token intellectuals who sit on boards of directors. He is almost surely there. Look high, not low. His future card, the card of what will come, is The World" (Pynchon 764). But how can Blicero ultimately be subsumed by the very systems of institutional power his queerness resists and disidentifies with?¹⁷⁸ Does Blicero's fate and his complicity in the horrific violence carried out by Nazis nullify his disidentificatory use of SM?

Unlike Margherita's SM experiences, which are largely focalized through her perspective, Blicero's story is generally mediated by the narrator or another character's memory, underscoring Blicero's limited access to all types of control, narrative or otherwise. For Blicero, the power of queer (and feminized) SM has its limits. Though scattered, he remains bound by the System, precisely because his desire to become part of the elect necessitates a faith in legible subjectivity that both Pudding and Margherita were willing to forgo, though in different ways.

Indeed, the final moments of Blicero and Gottfried's SM before the rocket launch—when "both are in army clothes. It's been a long time since either of them

¹⁷⁸ This interpretation of Blicero's tarot—that the launching of the rocket points to his having been absorbed by American institutional power rather than reading it as an oppressive apotheosis of his power mania—is based on Weisenburger's meticulous research on tarot symbolism that indicates how "Weissmann's tarot points up the end of his romantic desire and its translation into business, into conformity, into the cartelized military industrial sovereignties of the postwar period" (*Companion* 375).

dressed as women. It is important that they both be men” (Pynchon 736)—are characterized by hypermasculinity and the absence of Blicero’s subversive feminization of power. In place of Blicero’s previous feminization of power, we find a queer sexual performance that aligns with Halberstam’s description of 1920s and 1930s German “‘culturalist’ notions of male homosexuality that functioned in terms of the erotic connection between two conventionally masculine men” (*Queer Art* 156). We might read this alignment with Nazi ideology as Blicero’s last attempt to reconcile his queer desires with his desire for power by performing a type of homoeroticism tacitly accepted in the Third Reich. In many ways, the hypermasculine, military aesthetics found in this homoerotic scene between Blicero and Gottfried reflect “the ubiquitous tropes of fascist masculinity, including the stiff uniform, hardness, distance, virility, and cruelty” (Frost 129).

At the same time, this brief scene also resembles the eroticized, military power dynamics that early American leather culture styled itself after—recall my discussion of post-WWII leather history in the Introduction. This fetishization of hypermasculinity—“the leather gear of bike riders with a few paramilitary touches thrown in” (Baldwin, *Ties That Bind* 108)—among American leathersmen also represented “a kind of rebellious individualism. . . . Like other black-clad rebels of the 1950s, the gay leather crowd expressed its own disaffection with post-World War II America, although mainly with its antigay attitudes and staid sexual moralities” (Rubin, “Miracle” 254).

Ironically, gay leather culture rebelliously signalled its preference for stigmatized sexuality (SM) vis-à-vis clothing and accoutrements with a hypermasculine appeal, like jackboots and peaked caps, that are often associated with the aesthetics of fascism—

indeed, they are precisely what Blicero deployed in his final pursuit of Fascist power. To reiterate, I am referring to the practice of adopting fashion associated with fascistic imagery, a hypermasculine style like that in Tom of Finland's art and not specific Fascist symbols, which go unmentioned in this scene between Blicero and Gottfried.¹⁷⁹ After their army SM, Blicero ultimately cathects his erotic embrace of queer negativity onto Gottfried and foregoes SM's subversive potential and pleasures. His scattering across the American elite means that he will be subsumed by the very culture that leathermen felt disaffected from.

Although Blicero's SM does not dismantle the System in its entirety, it's important to acknowledge the complexity of his attempts. From the Hansel and Gretel episode through the 00000 launch, Blicero's eroticization of the rockets reveals how his sexual pleasures paradoxically gesture toward both SM's disruptive potential and its imbrication within systems of control. As a Nazi officer, Blicero should not take pleasure in military failures, such as when the very technology meant to offer protection instead threatens the lives of its creators: "crazed, [the rockets] turn at random, whinnying terribly in the sky, turn about and fall according each to its madness so unreachable and, it is feared, incurable" (Pynchon 98). Blicero takes sadistic pleasure in subjugating Katje and Gottfried in the cottage outside of the rocket battery, a location that renders them all equally vulnerable to the rockets' erratic nature. In much the same way that Blicero's disidentificatory drag relies on his ranking power over Gottfried, his masochistic pleasure

¹⁷⁹ Here I distinguish between a general aesthetic fetishization of hypermasculinity vis-à-vis fascistic overtones and the much less common practice of adopting "a historically accurate symbol such as the swastika . . . in a way that is continuous with the dominant imagery and state-level ideological interests of Third Reich Nazism" or even "choosing a 'plaything' that has been recuperated within the living symbolism of current neo-Nazi subgroups" (Wayne, *The Second Coming* 249).

in the rockets' threat is only possible because he's been stationed as captain of the V-2 battery in Holland. Blicero's masochistic desires refigure tools of war as personal tools of pleasure, undermining the rockets' intended political function.¹⁸⁰ Like his drag's disruption of gender roles, Blicero's pleasure in subjugating himself to the rockets resists Nazi masculinist ideals, rendering him both passive and vulnerable to penetration, in a way that aligns Blicero with the "seductive and intolerable image of a grown man, legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman" (Bersani, "Rectum" 212). This queer vulnerability also contains the additional risk (or for Blicero, masochistic pleasure in risk) of losing his military rank, since "the effeminate homosexual was persecuted in Nazi Germany both for his rejection of the heterosexual family and for his embrace of the feminine" (Halberstam, *Queer Art* 161). Perhaps even more than those disruptions that occur on the discursive level, these two material manifestations of Blicero's queer pleasure highlight his paradoxical reliance on and disruption of institutional power.

MARGHERITA IN THE ZONE

While Blicero's deployment of SM's disruptive power cannot vindicate his complicity with oppressive State power, rendering his queer negativity of limited effect, other instances of SM in Pynchon appear to function quite differently, like Margherita Erdmann's SM. While in some senses the queer power of Margherita's SM is animated

¹⁸⁰ That many of the V-2's were constructed by slave laborers from the Dora concentration camp who were "interned for violating paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code, 'which exacted punishment for certain abnormal sex practices' (Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* 45)" (Weisenburger, *Companion* 182), further demonstrates the paradox of Blicero's queerness; his masochistic pleasure in the rockets and sadistic sexual relationship with Gottfried rely on a Nazi regime that both exploited and sought to exterminate homosexuals.

by queer negativity, her sexual practices also reveal the interrelatedness of SM and narrative. However, the relation between SM and narrative that emerges from Margherita's practices differs in kind and in effect from the relation between SM and narrative found in queer texts and archives. That Pynchon structures Margherita's SM as an inherently narrative practice speaks to the broader implications of the theory of SM and narrative that emerged from my archival work.

Margherita's construction and pursuit of SM fantasy narratives—which position her as an active agent in her pleasure—further link her practices with those found in queer SM subcultures, particularly in narrative's ability to mediate amongst SM desire, fantasy, and embodied pleasure. Like the fictional characters discussed in Chapter Two or the archival letters discussed in Chapter Three, Margherita uses narrative as a way of realizing individual sexual fantasies. In much the same way, Margherita's reliance on narrative to achieve embodied pleasure makes visible SM's future-oriented temporality; the level of forethought and planning that SM necessitates recalls the discussion of “Calyx of Isis” in Chapter Two.

Specifically, Margherita's desire to be “punished” forms a central part of her sexual pleasure and her erotic narratives, as Slothrop discovers when he encounters her in the Zone. Antagonizing him until he physically hurts her, Margherita “begs to be tied with her stockings, star-fashion, to the bedpost. Sometimes she'll leave the house, and stay away for days, coming home with stories about Negro MPs beating her with nightsticks, screwing her in the asshole, how much she loved it, hoping to trigger some race/sex reaction, something a little bizarre, a little different . . .” (Pynchon 453). This anecdote is one of many instances in which Margherita goads Slothrop or, more

precisely, incites him to sadistic action. Here, the racialized dimensions of her SM narrative reflect her perceptive understanding of Slothrop's repressed sexual anxieties, rather than a manifestation of her own desire; in Slothrop's sodium amytal vision, Herman and Weisenburger identify Slothrop's "deeply unconscious cathexis of blackness and shit. . . . Slothrop's unconscious horror at interracial homosexual rape has its counterpart in his interracial homosexual delight in the 'callipygian rondure' of Whappo's buttocks" (195).¹⁸¹ As mentioned in my discussion of Pudding, this widely dispersed racialized eroticism is more reflective of Pynchon and the time in which he wrote, than it is of any single character's relationship to race; collectively, such references function as a minor commentary on the persistent global effects of slavery and colonialism in the West, or, as Herman and Weisenburger see it, "this material teaches . . . that American racial fantasies, and British too for that matter, are close cousins of those of good Aryan Germans" (195). By successfully constructing stories to provoke a sexual reaction, Margherita deploys elements of (postmodernist) narrative previously reserved for the narrator. Among the characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*, only Margherita offers metadiegetic narratives that prompt action on the narrative's diegetic level.

The uncertain ontological status of Margherita's rape claim aligns it with postmodernist narrative strategies. Neither Slothrop nor the reader has any way to corroborate her stories. Are they "factually" true? Are they her sexual fantasies? Or are

¹⁸¹ Part One, Episode 10 is largely comprised of Slothrop's hallucinatory visions while under the influence of sodium amytal. During this episode, Slothrop imagines a scene from 1939 in which he is almost raped by Malcolm X, but instead, fantastically escapes down a toilet at the Roseland Ballroom. His hallucination shifts further back in time as Slothrop imagines a Western scene featuring a cowboy with a sidekick named Whappo, whose "Afro-Scandinavian" heritage endows him with "the callipygian rondure observed among the races of the Dark Continent with the taut and noble musculature of sturdy Olaf, our blond Northern cousin" (Pynchon 71). Interestingly, in Slothrop's fantasy, Whappo also has a penchant for homoerotic SM—a "fetish for horsy paraphernalia, likes to be quilt-whipped [. . .]" (Pynchon 70).

they outright lies? McHale observes a recurring “concretization-deconcretization structure” in *Gravity’s Rainbow*: sometimes an explicit warning that material is not part of the text’s “real” world either precedes or follows a scene in question; elsewhere an episode’s unreality is marked either by an “internal contradiction, or incompatibility with the frame of ‘reality’ within which the episode has been placed, or by some gross violation of extra-textual norms of verisimilitude” (*Constructing Postmodernism* 67, 68). In McHale’s view, this structure often appears in relation to taboo behavior, drug hallucinations, or (Slothrop’s) dreams and sexual fantasies. Margherita’s quasi-pornographic narration of a violent sexual encounter with “Negro MPs,” however, does not entirely conform to the structural patterns McHale describes. Rather, the ontological status of her erotic (fantasy) narratives remains unknowable for both characters and extra-diegetic readers.

Despite the indeterminacy of their status, Margherita’s narratives have “real” effects within Pynchon’s fictional world, as her articulations of taboo behavior prompt Slothrop to sexual arousal. These effects illuminate Margherita’s relationship to the text’s postmodernist poetics and the queerness underlying her embodied and narrative practices, which seem to have no goal other than her own pleasure or *jouissance*. Recalling that Margherita conceives a child during a scene filmed for *Alpdrücken* may seem to problematize any alignment between her SM and queer negativity; however, this moment can still be read as a disruption of heteronormative values in that the identity of Bianca’s father remains unknown. Her uncertain parentage exposes Bianca to sadistic games—“back at Bydgoszcz it became an amusing party game to speculate on who the child’s father was. [. . .] They’d run the film and ask Bianca questions, and she had to answer yes

or no” (Pynchon 469)—thus undermining both the privileged/protected status of the child and the organization of the nuclear family within heteronormative society. Given Margherita’s resistance to heteropatriarchal family structures and her investment in pleasures that refuse the traditional social-biological functions of sexual practice, Margherita’s SM decouples her sexual practice from the narrative of reproductive futurism as Edelman has defined it. In doing this, Margherita destabilizes Slothrop’s and, by extension the reader’s, ability to locate teleological narratives.

The text’s discursive structure thus places the postmodernist tendency to destabilize traditional narratives directly into the hands of a character, who also happens to be a woman whose masochistic pleasure in film and in life is made explicit by Stefania Procalowska: “Margherita’s problem was that she always enjoyed it too much, chained up in those torture rooms. She couldn’t enjoy it any other way” (Pynchon 469). In her reworking of these (filmic) SM scenarios with Slothrop, Margherita reclaims the culturally constructed subjectivity her (pornographic) film roles projected onto her.

Within the text’s SM scenes, only Margherita articulates and enacts her fantasies. Where Pudding’s and Slothrop’s are never vocalized and we primarily learn second-hand about Blicero’s SM, Margherita narrates hers to Slothrop, inciting embodied practice—and achieving textual authority in a way that Pudding, Slothrop, and Blicero never do. Her language prompts embodied male action, and this narrative control leads to a queer sexual practice that ultimately dismantles received notions of womanhood, female agency, and accepted forms of female desire. Though Pudding’s and Blicero’s SM practices produce material effects in the diegetic world they are limited by institutional frameworks that, in the case of Blicero, ultimately reabsorb and thus diffuse any attempts

at disruption. In contrast, Margherita's SM subverts the heteronormative logic that normally denies *jouissance*, a disruptive pleasure splitting apart the fantasy of heteronormative social telos, and offering instead a queer pleasure, a degenitalized sexuality, and a narrative thoroughly invested in instability.

CRITICAL PERVERSIONS

Queering Margherita's narratives allows us to reconsider a decades-old critical consensus, most recently formulated by Herman and Weisenburger: "the narration ascribes Greta's sadomasochistic conditioning to her acting in filmed scenes of whipping and sexual domination, scripted for fascist audiences" (76). Indeed, the pathologizing link between SM and Fascism so many critics foreground is often used to implicate Margherita in the grotesque failures of the 1960s' "free love" ethos, like the Manson family. Equating SM in *Gravity's Rainbow* with the failure of 1960s liberationist, free love movements, Herman and Weisenburger write that "the horrors of failing that kind of liberation, of regressing into delusional and psychotic paranoia, were also readily apparent. Most sixties histories point to the August 1969 Manson family murders of a pregnant Sharon Tate and four others as one object lesson" (66). For them, the failure of such alternative family structures and nonnormative sexual politics are made visible in the corrupt family dynamics of Blicero's domination of Katje and Gottfried, and, indeed, they suggest that "the ghastly scenes of [Blicero's] obsessional and sadomasochistic hetero- and homosexual rape-tortures of Katje and Gottfried compos[e] a grotesque mock

family (think Charles Manson)” (78).¹⁸² The logic of this reading would also equate Margherita’s sexual desires with such perversions of the free love movement.

However, Margherita’s desire to be cut and penetrated reflects a narrative of unbecoming that resists the types of identity politics that emerged from 1960s countercultural and political movements. Rather than an unconscious perversion of love, liberation, and human connection—as Herman and Weisenburger’s reference to the Manson family suggests—Margherita’s performances actively critique the idea of sex as the epitome of 1960s values. This criticism of the 1960s free love ethos as nothing more than a hollow and ineffective form of resistance is repeated throughout the novel, as when the 1960s counterculture rallying cry, “An army of lovers can’t be beaten,” is inverted and replaced with “AN ARMY OF LOVERS CAN BE BEATEN” (Pynchon 161). In *Gravity’s Rainbow* love is not—as the 1960s movements had hoped—an expression of connection and humanism, but rather it becomes an unpredictable and disruptive force, easily appropriated by institutions of power. In dismantling received cultural understandings of “love” and replacing them with her own sexual pleasure, unfettered from social values and any optimistic teleology, Margherita evacuates the signifiers “love” and “sex” so thoroughly that she can redefine them on her own terms. Despite the universal compulsion “to participate in a common symbolic system [which . . .] deprives us of individuality” Margherita’s relation to language reveals how we can also “carv[e] out a singular place within that order” by “claiming language for our own purposes” (Ruti 123). In this sense, Margherita’s development of SM narratives for her

¹⁸² Herman and Weisenburger also locate the nonnormative sexual practices of Franz Pökler, Ned Pointsman, and General Pudding within what they identify as Pynchon’s commentary on the failure of 1960s leftist politics.

queer pleasure and her narratives' reframing of intersubjective relations, echoes the uses of narrative in the archival letters of the previous chapter.

Furthermore, Herman and Weisenburger's focus on perversions of the 1960s' free love ethos neglects an equally relevant, but queerer, historical context. The publication of *Gravity's Rainbow* coincides both with an increase in queer subcultures, like the gay leather community, and with the Cold War Era conflation of Nazi/Fascist themes and hypererotic pleasures, which became one way of coping with the unprecedented violence of the Final Solution, rocket technology, and nuclear power. In representing this conflation, Pynchon's novel contributes to the proliferation of eroticized Nazi/Fascist imagery in films, novels, and art that circulated in the 1970s and early 1980s, e.g. Liliana Cavani's film *The Night Porter* (1974), Lina Wertmüller's film *Seven Beauties* (1975), Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film *Lili Marleen* (1981), and Elfriede Jelinek's novel *The Piano Teacher* (1983), to name only a few. As Susan Sontag observes, this was a period in which "the SS . . . become a referent of sexual adventurism. Much of the imagery of far-out sex has been placed under the sign of Nazism" in both pop culture and pornographic literature (101-2). Similarly, Nazi/Fascist imagery—a shorthand for the eroticization of taboo (power) relations and hypermasculinity—often inflected the images of gay leather culture, as in Robert Mapplethorpe's photography and in Tom of Finland's art, the latter of which became widely available in the 1970s in the United States.

As it happens, the queer potential of Pynchon's SM did not go unnoticed by the gay leather community. In a 1980 interview for *Drummer* magazine, Edmund White applauds Pynchon's Sado-anarchism and suggests that "the need for combativeness is worked out in leather sex. . . . There's also the feeling of [leathermen's] being well-

seasoned; of really knowing themselves and of having admitted a lot of things about themselves” (50). In many ways, Margherita’s SM thus seems closer in spirit and execution to gay leather culture, which consciously distanced itself from hopeful identitarian politics, than to any failed 1960s free love ethos. Indeed, “the original leather bars were places where men could gather and, in sharp contradiction to those positions [gay and lesbian assimilationist politics], say: In your face! . . . It took sex as its own ultimate value” (Preston, *My Life* 128). Thus, Margherita’s capacious desire for multiple sexual encounters, despite other characters’ (and perhaps readers’) pathologizing gaze, her commitment to fleeting sexual pleasures and to refiguring the purpose of sexual practice, and her resistance to normative sexual narrative, all parallel the ethos of nascent gay leather culture in the early 1970s.

Margherita’s empowerment emerges in contrast to the only other female SM practitioner in the text. Unlike Margherita’s powerful articulations of sexual desire, largely demonized by critics, Katje’s explicit passivity during two bureaucratically organized instances of SM has prompted critics to “excuse” Katje’s behavior—both sexually and politically. Despite their differences, the novel cultivates parallels between the two women. For both, their initial SM practices are preceded by descriptions of them on film. In the first instance, the narrator’s description of Katje being secretly filmed at The White Visitation transitions into Katje’s memory of her submission in the Hansel and Gretel episode discussed earlier. In the second instance, a summary of Margherita’s sexually submissive role in *Alpdrücken* precedes her reenacting that scene with Slothrop. Their similarities are observed by Slothrop himself, who, upon first meeting Margherita on the dilapidated *Alpdrücken* set, thinks of her as “his latest reminder of Katje . . .”

(Pynchon 403), and the details of their masochistic submission also seem to connect them: in her film roles Margherita was “usually strapped down or chained to something” (Pynchon 400), much like Katje who was “passive, bound, and gagged” for Blicero (Pynchon 96).

The context of Margherita’s encounter with Slothrop, however, complicates any easy equation of the two women. In the Zone, Margherita is never a coerced and silenced submissive, like Katje, but rather the active and vocal author of her own pleasure. With her explicit sexual agency, Margherita is the anti-Katje, a paradigm of SM’s queer-postmodern potential. If we are to accept the generally positive readings of Katje, which redeem her from her Nazi past—despite her being “credited with smelling out at least three crypto-Jewish families” (Pynchon 99)—it seems only fair that we should be equally generous in our readings of Margherita.

Few critics, however, acknowledge the highly discontinuous depiction of Margherita that enables such a refigurative reading. They fail to distinguish between Margherita’s behavior as a puppet in the Rocket System—a fragmented and paradoxical version of her we mostly learn about secondhand—and the more cohesive, self-possessed version of Margherita that Slothrop meets after V-E Day, in the Zone. Eliding this distinction, Herman and Weisenburger, for example, indiscriminately call Margherita “another good Nazi . . . murdering Jewish children as if she were the Shekhinah gathering shattered bits of the profane world” (178). In focusing only on Margherita’s past, they allude to Ensign Morituri’s Story, which, relayed to Slothrop in 1945, six years after the events, blames Margherita for the mysterious disappearance of Jewish boys in the resort town Bad Karma in 1939. As with Pudding’s and Blicero’s SM scenes we must

distinguish this highly mediated, metadiegetic narrative from the more realistic representation of Margherita's SM in the Zone. That Morituri's story focuses on Margherita's imbrication in institutional power underscores the distinction I laid out at the beginning of this chapter: the more temporal distance and mediation framing an SM scene, the more likely Pynchon will be to lapse into aestheticized and clichéd representations of SM that do not align with practitioner-produced understandings circulating amongst queer leather subcultures. But, without denying Margherita's murderous past, we can also see how the textual cues pointing to redemptive readings of Katje also point toward refigurations of Margherita. The Kabbalistic motif coloring Margherita's Bad Karma days—in her murderous fugue state she identifies as the Shekinah, whose darker side makes her “especially susceptible to domination from demonic powers from the Other Side” (Weisenburger 265)¹⁸³—echoes the Kabbalistic overtones of Katje and Pudding's coprophagic scene. In that scene, Katje identifies herself as Domina Nocturna, a figure from German mythology, whom Katje also calls “blessed Metatron” (Pynchon 234), one of the archangels—according to some sources—the Recording Angel. Indeed, the scene between Katje and Gottfried is a “satirical inversion of the Kabbalistic ascent to Merkabah” which, instead of culminating with the light of God, ends with Pudding kneeling “in abject servility (but sexually erect) before an avatar of the Shekinah, the mother of material being and of dissolute death” (Weisenburger 144-45). Like Margherita's past submission to Nazi control, Katje's SM with Pudding, orchestrated by the System (here The White Visitation), explicitly draws

¹⁸³ Although in Kabbalistic Judaism, the Shekinah is primarily the positive female manifestation of the Divine, the Shekinah “also has a dark side, appearing as the moon, a lightless receiver of light” (Weisenburger 265). Weisenburger explains that during Margherita's Bad Karma days, she appears as Shekinah the “destroyer, not as the rainbow symbol of Yahweh's covenant” (Weisenburger 265).

from Blicero's Nazi SM: Katje "has watched Captain Blicero with Gottfried, and has learned the proper style" (Pynchon 239).

While many critics absolve Katje of her horrific past, none show the same generosity towards Margherita. Tellingly, Herman and Weisenburger find a critical, narrative function in Blicero's SM game, in its "allusions to Germanic folktale," which "signal the ways that Weissmann's manias are culturally encoded, and the narration opens the door to historical and ethical critiques of Nazi Germany" (79). While they don't exactly excuse Katje's participation in Their System, Herman and Weisenburger emphasize the institutional deployment of SM in Katje's case, yet they make no such allowances for the System's influence over Margherita during her (murderous) fugue state. Nonetheless, there is enough textual evidence to assume that Margherita remained under Their control until sometime in Spring 1945 when, after testing what would become Gottfried's death shroud, the Imipolex bodysuit, she is suddenly ejected from Their System and born anew, a rebirth as a liberated figure of the Zone almost literal in its imagery: "time had lost meaning. One morning I was outside the factory, naked, in the rain" where, she tells us, she "felt a silence waiting for me up there. Not for them, but for me alone . . . my own personal silence . . ." (Pynchon 496). In this post-V-E Day rebirth, Margherita is remade, ultimately breaking through that silence by claiming, narrating, and enacting her own sexual pleasures, essentially writing her own story on the Zone's blank slate.

When we do encounter Margherita in the Zone she, like Europe after V-E Day, has broken away from Their System, from the old power structures, and from the paranoid wartime mentality that ultimately produced her psychic break in 1939,

culminating in a fugue state hysteria of which she has no memory.¹⁸⁴ By July 1945, we have left behind the Margherita of the past, the actress of Gerhardt von Göll's pornographic and propagandistic films who was, like Katje, merely the System's pawn. Indeed, Morituri makes clear that Margherita's violence in *Bad Karma* coincides with her psychic break. It would thus be a mistake to argue that her freely practiced SM, in the Zone no less, necessarily implicates her in the awfulness of the Rocket System. Indeed, her SM is anomalous among the other practitioners, who without exception submit to SM explicitly deployed by the System prior to V-E Day. Whether that System operates under the flag of Allied or Axis powers, all—except Margherita in the Zone—are imbricated in the institutional co-optation of embodied pleasure. But Margherita and Slothrop's SM, among the literal ruins of former power structures, occurs outside any System or surveillance—a liberating and resistant, though fleeting, practice, counterpointing both the Blicero/Katje/Gottfried triad and Katje and Pudding's coprophagic scene. Recalling Thanatz's theorization of Sado-anarchism, we can say that while Blicero's and Pudding's SM suggests that dominance and submission are resources the Structure needs for its survival, Margherita refigures these resources for private pleasure, the dissemination of which destabilizes the System and, by extension, queers the narrative as a whole.

Margherita's narrative authority distinguishes her SM on the discursive level as well. In both Blicero's and Pudding's SM, the narrator retains control over the narrative and thus over these queer modes of expression. During "the Rome-Berlin Axis" scene

¹⁸⁴ Her 1939 fugue state is paralleled by a momentary return to mania when, in July 1945, Slothrop and Margherita see a veiled woman at *Bad Karma*, a vision that precipitates Margherita's brief disappearance: "not only does she avoid the subject of the woman by the spring, she may have *lost the memory already*" (Pynchon 466–67, emphasis mine).

Blicero's articulations are mediated through Katje's memory, "each utterance a closed flower" (Pynchon 96); here, the narrative lacks an internal focalization through Blicero about these queer practices. The discursive presentation of Pudding's SM is primarily controlled by the narrator as well. There, the only direct dialogue is the communication between Katje and Pudding, whose words merely provide the details that fuel an SM narrative predetermined by Pointsman; since they cannot exert significant narrative control over this scenario, their dialogue exchange merely individuates—rather than fully disrupting—the institutional deployment of sexuality.

Again, seeing Margherita's SM as an instance of Sado-anarchism counters the critical tendency to elide her agency and read her solely as a sexual object, a trend that replicates the very patriarchal objectification of women such readings nominally critique. As narrator of her own pleasure, she takes control of her sexuality in a way that no other masochist in the text ever does. Even Gottfried's pleasure is silenced; recall, his words literally blocked and gagged "deep in the throat, the gullet, where Blicero's own cock's head has burst for the last time" (Pynchon 773). The Margherita of the Zone becomes, uniquely, the author of her own desire. By focusing on Margherita as author, we can see that narrative authority is integral to queer empowerment in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In this, Margherita calls to mind my study of archival letters, which revealed how SM pleasure largely depends on narrative: Like Margherita, individuals from across the country leveraged narrative as a way of asserting their own sexual agency in order to claim and pursue embodied SM experience.

This queer reading contests Herman and Weisenburger's elision of Margherita's agency when they discount masochistic practice as an acceptable expression of (female)

sexual pleasure, as seen in their description of Margherita as a “somewhat decrepit movie actress with a terrible desire for men to chastise her flesh” and their description of her film roles featuring her “bound, whipped, and mock raped” (121, 76). If their seeing a “mock rape” improves on Bérubé’s understanding that *Alpdrücken* “culminates in the torture, gang rape, and dismemberment of its star. . . . The dismemberment, of course, is not ‘real’. . . . But the rape is” (240), this hardly amends the general erasure of Margherita’s agency. Taken as a whole, however, Pynchon’s description of the *Alpdrücken* set in fact emphasizes the simulated and consensual nature of Margherita’s physical submission to Slothrop: there are “wood chains, most of the silver paint worn away now,” and she “insist[s] he fasten the tin manacles to her wrists and ankles” as “the old phony rack groan[s] beneath them” (Pynchon 400, 403, emphasis mine). Clearly, this faux-torture chamber could never—in the initial filming or in her reenactment with Slothrop—physically restrain Margherita. In the initial filming of *Alpdrücken* there were likely social and economic factors that might have made Margherita’s participation less than consensual; the narrative, however, makes no such overt indications. Despite these details, critics refuse to assign her agency in both instances equally, while insisting that her SM desires are bound by the terms of male pornographic fantasies or, worse still, pathology. Such readings tend to rely on both heteronormative values and anti-sex feminism that narrowly define acceptable modes of female sexual agency and desire. Unfolding in a faux-torture chamber, Margherita’s SM appears not as rape but a manifestation of her individual desires.

Equating her SM practice with (mock) rape, critics do not see Margherita’s explicit role in orchestrating her own submission, particularly in the Zone. For example,

even as Herman and Weisenburger acknowledge that Margherita is not actually raped, for example, their discussion of her sexuality relies on pejorative terms—“paraphilia,” “passive,” “pathetic decadence,” and “terrible,” etc.—thereby obscuring female agency by casting both Margherita’s masochism and SM practice in general as perverse disorders.¹⁸⁵ Nonetheless, in inciting Slothrop to sadistic action, she becomes the empowered agent of her own sexuality.¹⁸⁶ Failing to consider this dynamic, readings of *Gravity’s Rainbow* have tended to betray an affirmation of heteronormative hegemony, a patriarchal system dependent upon stigmatizing and controlling female desire. In its maligning of Margherita’s sexual practice, contrasted with the relative silence about Katje’s SM, much of Pynchon criticism has been marked by a persistent reification of female sexual oppression.

As an element of her queer practice, Margherita’s re-creation of *Alpdrücken* and her subsequent construction of various SM scenarios induce an ontological slippage between her narratives and her acting roles, associating her sexual and authorial agency with postmodernist narrative strategies. Narrating and enacting her own desires, she refigures the patriarchal (pornographic) film narratives that had previously rendered her an object within the Rocket System. In this way, Margherita becomes the ultimate, subversive Other within the text, circumventing the System’s and the narratives’ objectifying agenda. Far from a tool for patriarchal oppression, she rewrites these erotic

¹⁸⁵ “Paraphilia” persists primarily today in the notoriously conservative *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*; even the recently released DSM-V (2013), however, no longer classifies consensual sadomasochism as a paraphilic disorder.

¹⁸⁶ Indeed, it is commonly acknowledged that the masochist’s “apparent passivity is a ruse intended to disavow what the masochist actually knows to exist but plays the game of denying: his (or her) very real sexual agency and pleasure” (Williams 212).

narratives, rendering them an instrument of her queer practice. In her liberated Zone state, then, she reduces the patriarchal narrative to an accoutrement of SM, roughly equivalent to the tin manacles, phony rack, and padded whip.

MARGHERITA AND QUEERNESS ABOARD THE ANUBIS

The film narratives Margherita repurposes are not derived solely from her own acting career, nor do her erotic power exchanges consistently reify an immutable, gendered binary of dominance and submission. Later in the novel, Margherita and Bianca are “playing stage mother and reluctant child” for the entertainment of the passengers aboard the ship *Anubis* (Pynchon 473). Bianca impersonates Shirley Temple and performs “On the Good Ship Lollipop,” but when Margherita tells Bianca to perform “Animal Crackers in My Soup,” Bianca refuses, calling her mother a bitch, and Margherita proceeds to pull Bianca over her lap and spank her bare skin with a ruler: “Bianca kicks her legs, silk stockings squeak together, erotic and audible now that the group have fallen silent and found the medium of touch, hands reaching out to breasts and crotches, Adam’s apples bobbing, tongues licking lips . . . where’s the old masochist and monument Slothrop knew back in Berlin?” (Pynchon 474). Their performance incites an orgy among the passengers: couples, threesomes, groups, men and women engaging in vaginal and anal intercourse, masturbation, oral sex, even a lone voyeur taking pleasure in the whole scene. Here the sadomasochistic valences of the spanking highlight SM’s queer, postmodernist tendencies, as this localized dispersal of queerness aboard the *Anubis* parallels how Margherita’s SM queers the novel as a whole. The orgiastic domino effect of her performance, disseminating queerness aboard the *Anubis*, is a *mise en abîme*

of the narrative's own dialogic relation to Margherita's queerness. In this sense, we can see how postmodernist representations not only model—as McHale explained—the sadomasochistic relation between text and reader (*Postmodernist* 225-6), but also model the sadomasochistic relation between narrative content and discursive structure. In the case of Margherita, the self-shattering force of masochism extends beyond a character's individual ego to effect discursive disruptions in the narrative as a whole.

Characterizing the passengers' orgiastic pleasures as queer could certainly be complicated by citing Slothrop's fall into the sea—"it's adios to the *Anubis* and all its screaming Fascist cargo" (Pynchon 500)—which, on the surface, seems to align the nonnormative sexual pleasures aboard the *Anubis* with the institutional co-optation of sexuality that has been associated with fascism throughout the text. However, the context here for "Fascist" suggests that in this instance the term has more to do with the passengers' countries of origin than with their current politics or power. I suggest we acknowledge the ambiguity of the passengers and liken them to the thousands of other displaced persons wandering across the Zone, with whom they share far more than they do with the upper echelons of Fascist and Nazi power. Although they are floating instead of walking, largely wealthy instead of impoverished, the *Anubis* passengers—like every stateless individual in the Zone—are caught in the ambiguous realm between power structures, old and new.¹⁸⁷

As Slothrop observes upon first boarding the *Anubis*, "it is the same old shit that was going on back at Raoul de la Perlimpinpin's place, and for all Slothrop knows it's the

¹⁸⁷ Herman and Weisenburger explain how "Pynchon's refugees, denationalized families, former concentration camp inmates, and prisoners of war collectively represent the multitude of stateless persons streaming over occupied Europe in the months following V-E Day" (142).

same party” (Pynchon 470)—the party that has been going on “ever since this piece of France was liberated. [. . .] They drift in from all corners of Allied Europe, linked by some network of family, venery and a history of other such parties” (Pynchon 247). Herman and Weisenburger see the passengers of the *Anubis* as “in the full grip of repressive tolerance, of mindless pleasures managed, it seems, by representatives of the power elite” (52), even though the *Anubis* is described as “a yachtful of refugees from the Lublin regime” (Pynchon 464).¹⁸⁸ As an arm of the Soviet government in Poland, the Lublin regime was hostile to all anti-Communist forces—whether part of the Polish resistance or hold-overs from Nazi occupation. That at least some of the *Anubis* passengers are fleeing the Lublin regime, which carried out the “Soviet elimination of nationalist resistance groups who were loyal to Poland’s government-in-exile in London” (Smith and Davis 202), only heightens their ambiguous politics. Indeed, the tension between “fascist cargo” and “refugees from the Lublin regime” thwarts readerly desires to definitively associate the *Anubis* passengers with the flight of Fascists from Europe following WWII. Indeed, these comically ineffectual caricatures of former elites—such as Mme. Sztup¹⁸⁹ and “an elderly lady in lemon organza,” “a major of the Yugoslav artillery in dress uniform,” “a long-legged ballerina from Paris,” “a tall Swiss divorcée in tight-laced leather corselette and black Russian boots,” “a retired Russian banker,” and

¹⁸⁸ In July 1944, the Polish Committee of National Liberation and the Soviet Army established a government in Lublin that would oversee the Polish territories liberated by the Red Army. The Lublin Committee “also sanctioned the Soviet annexation of the former Polish provinces east of the Bug and provided for the uprooting of some 4.5 million Poles from these regions” (Sword, “Lublin Committee” n.p.).

¹⁸⁹ Though Pynchon frequently gives comical names to both “good guys” and “bad guys,” Mme. Sztup can be read as comically ineffectual in that “sztup,” a variation of the Yiddish “shtup” (to push), means in American vernacular “to fuck.” Thus, Mme. Sztup is linked to both vulgar, low humor and, in a WWII context, to the underdog. Indeed, the humor here is both Jewish and crudely sexual, a tendency we don’t see in Pynchon’s naming of villains, even middle-management villains.

“two adorable schoolgirls” (Pynchon 474–75)—are now, post-V-E Day, outsiders, losers in the Structure’s game of power, old and new. While this reading does not excuse their former Fascist affiliations, it does return us to that deep ambivalence, so characteristic of other Zone wanderers and of Pynchon’s postmodernist narrative itself. Ejected by the reigning power structures of their respective homelands and now sailing with no real direction, the *Anubis* passengers, despite their pasts, are in their way no better and no worse than the Zone’s many blackmarketeers who service everyone, their tenuous and ambiguous existence in this anarchic world constituting yet another *mise en abîme*: they are a Zone within the Zone.

Having first associated Bianca with Shirley Temple, Margherita’s erotic performance with her subverts both the heteronormative privileging of the child and the narrative of unsullied and wholesome American youth, further demonstrating Margherita’s ability to queer cinematic and cultural narratives for her own pleasure. By inciting an orgy through her queered Shirley Temple performance aboard the *Anubis*, a ship named after the Egyptian god of the dead, Margherita invokes the relation between queer (narrative) practices and death. The SM-inspired orgy becomes another instance of the Eros/Thanatos dialectic, highlighting SM’s postmodernist narrative strategies of the sort also evident in two unfinished narrative arcs associated with the *Anubis*. Bianca’s ultimate fate is never articulated within the narrative. Bernard Duyfhuizen observes that both Bianca’s age and her “disappearance from the fictional universe after her liaison with Slothrop [are] equally vexed,” suggesting that “a mimetic reading misses the postmodern narrative function of Bianca’s decharacterization to the level of a cipher and trap for readers who want teleologically to complete her story by a represented death

scene” (“A Suspension Forever” n.p.). And also remaining unnarrated is the fate of the *Anubis* and its passengers—who are likely doomed to “panic the second the sunken iceberg is knocked, / Naughty ’n’ noisy, and very Walpurgisnacht.” “That’s how the party will end,” we’re told (Pynchon 470).

While many readers, and even Slothrop himself, suspect Margherita may have killed Bianca, or is at least responsible for her disappearance, these possibilities seem questionable in light of several narrative elements. To begin with, as Duyfhuizen notes, when below decks on the *Anubis*, Slothrop encounters “something hanging from the overhead. Icy little thighs in wet silk swing against his face. They smell of the sea” (Pynchon 540); it appears that Bianca (though she is never named here) died of drowning and also—somehow—of hanging (Duyfhuizen, “A Suspension Forever” n.p.). That he smells the sea recalls Slothrop’s fateful lunge into the water when he thinks Bianca has fallen overboard, though we are left wondering how Slothrop could find Bianca hanging below decks if she had already drowned more than a week before. The darkness below decks prevents Slothrop from ever confirming the corpse’s existence and, once the lights return, Slothrop finds no evidence of it. Later in the novel, Slothrop wishes, “let Bianca be all right” (Pynchon 562), further confusing things, as this seems to imply that Slothrop supposes Bianca to be alive.¹⁹⁰ Despite the unknowability of either Bianca’s fate or Margherita’s past, the implication of Ensign Morituri’s Story—that Margherita is capable of child murder—has defined critics’ negative perception of both Margherita and her SM. While I am not suggesting that we simply overlook this context, it is worth

¹⁹⁰ Citing this passage, Duyfhuizen concludes that, at the very least, “either Slothrop has no certainty of Bianca’s fate or he is repressing what he knows” (“A Suspension Forever” n.p.).

acknowledging that, regardless of the truthfulness of Morituri's story, those events (which Margherita has no recollection of) occurred years prior to Margherita's rebirth in the Zone when she is finally freed from being a puppet of the Nazi rocket system and becomes instead a displaced wanderer without political or national affiliations.

Though Margherita's questionable past certainly casts a shadow over our reading of her overall, it should not be taken as the defining feature of her character, particularly since Pynchon scholarship has come to redemptive understandings of other characters with problematic histories. As noted earlier, critics have been forgiving in their readings of Katje, who—by her own admission—turned over several Jewish families to the Nazis during her time as a double-agent, using the ethically dubious excuse of needing to maintain her cover. Indeed, Katje's SM unfolds under the direction of both Nazi and British rule, her escape from Blicero's control to *The White Visitation* merely trades one form of political and sexual subjugation for another. Where Katje is passive in her SM, merely carrying out bureaucratic orders, Margherita, once free in the Zone, actively and independently pursues and constructs her own SM practice, instructing Slothrop how to tie her, telling him to “find something to whip me with,” and how to do it, “now on the insides of my thighs. . . .” (Pynchon 402). Despite her active role in aiding the Final Solution, Katje's passive sexuality appears to vindicate her in critics' eyes, who seem willing to overlook both her past (and arguably present) imbrication in institutional power. In contrast, critics make no such distinction between Margherita the actress, serving as a tool of Nazi propaganda, and her post-V-E Day freedom. Thus, when critics begin from the assumption that SM is a perverse extension of Fascism, Margherita's active desire for SM implicates her as a Nazi and “child murderer” (Herman and

Weisenburger 170) beyond redemption. So while acknowledging our doubts about her past, it is equally important to give Margherita—like Katje before her—the benefit of the doubt and not allow her questionable past to thwart a queer recuperation of her SM.

Exemplifying the postmodernist disruptions of narrative resolution, the unfinished stories of Bianca and of the *Anubis* also associate such narrative disruption with a queer embrace of orgiastic pleasure or *jouissance*. For Edelman, such disruptive and queer pleasure insists on “the impossibility of Symbolic closure, the absence of any Other to affirm the Symbolic order’s truth, and hence the illusory status of meaning as defense against the self-negating substance of *jouissance*” (48). The impossibility of symbolic closure on the narrative level of the text, seen in the incomplete narrative arcs of both Bianca and the *Anubis*, parallels the narrative of the rocket—which hovers at the end of the novel, never falling. Amid the seemingly endless iteration of details and the multiplicity of narratives, these two queer narratives ultimately disappear into textual voids, narrative silence.

Like Margherita’s emblematic queerness aboard the *Anubis*, the ship itself reflects how queer sexual and textual practice become indicative of the postmodern condition within *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The *Anubis* is a floating party, “a fabulous or-gy [. . .]We can’t recall just how it star-ted, / But there’s only one way it can end!” and the moment Slothrop boards the ship he is surrounded by “a density of orgy-goers” (Pynchon 470, 471). Taken collectively, these elements—Bianca’s unnarrated fate, the sexual activities of the *Anubis* passengers, and the concomitant linking of sexuality with death—foreground ontological instability on both the storyworld and discursive levels of the text. Throughout the *Anubis* episode Pynchon emphasizes the nonnormative practices of the

orgy-goers, the “degenerate company Slothrop has fallen in with,” whose exaggerated sexual practices include “a girl with an enormous glass dildo inside which baby piranhas are swimming” and “a Montenegrin countess [. . .] being fucked simultaneously in her chignon and her navel by a pair of octogenarians [. . .] carrying on some sort of technical discussion in what seems to be ecclesiastical Latin” (Pynchon 475). This hyperbolic and comic description of the orgy-goers’ sexual pleasures, aboard a ship named after the god of the dead, is a microcosm of the larger sexual culture that pervades both the thematics and poetics of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The textual interplay between queerness and postmodernism is clarified by recalling McHale’s suggestion that “if our culture’s ontological landscape is unprecedented in human history—at least in the degree of its pluralism—it also incorporates one feature common to all cultures, all ontological landscapes, namely the ultimate ontological boundary between life and death” (*Postmodernist* 38). Aboard the *Anubis*, which floats metaphorically between life and death, Pynchon depicts an unprecedented pluralism of nonnormative sexuality. The *Anubis* is literally a (free-)floating signifier, a physical manifestation of queer sexuality and ontological uncertainty in postmodern culture.

MARGHERITA AS QUEER-POSTMODERN TEXT

Margherita is a central symbol in the text of queer sexual and textual practices, her narrative role linking disparate plot lines and highlighting the novel’s indeterminate ontological landscape. Many readers have observed the text’s doubling and mirroring of

characters or, in McHale's terms, how they "map onto" each other.¹⁹¹ Indeed, the proliferation of such mappings, McHale writes, fuels the reader's "growing suspicion that almost any character in this novel can be analogically related to almost any other character" (*Constructing* 80). McHale's explanation of "mapping" allows me to further develop the link between SM and narrative established in my archival chapter, demonstrating how an optic that considers the link between SM and narrative is useful for literary studies more generally, even if studying canonical fiction reveals a slightly different relation between SM and narrative. Through mapping, we can connect Margherita's queer practices to a fundamental postmodernist narrative device, the violation of narrative levels of the text, or metalepsis, which McHale sees as the paradigm of postmodernism's ontological dominant, best exemplified by Pynchon's "cinematic images of copulation [that] lead to the conception of two real girls [. . . and] in a final, apocalyptic metalepsis, the rocket launched within the film-within-the-novel [that] hangs poised above the theatre in which the film itself is being viewed" (*Postmodernist* 130).

Significantly both instances of metalepsis cited by McHale are directly linked to Margherita's SM practice, a practice that also violates narrative levels. Margherita's *Alpdrücken* role leads to the conception of her own daughter, which in turn is the pornographic scene Franz Pökler replays in his head as he and Leni conceive their daughter, Ilse. Margherita's relation to metalepsis, however, is not limited to violations

¹⁹¹ McHale identifies "a whole system of analogies among characters and events . . . : both Slothrop and Franz Pökler map onto Max Schlepzig; Leni maps onto Greta, Ilse onto Greta's daughter Bianca, and Greta onto her own earlier self" (*Constructing* 79). Bersani also identifies such "enigmatic and frequently eerie replications," to argue that "the entire Zone may be a spectral double of the real world, a collection of images simulating scenes from all over the universe" ("Pynchon, Paranoia" 105).

within the diegetic level of narration. When Slothrop whips Margherita until he draws blood, “she kneels and kisses his boots. Not exactly the scenario she wanted but close enough, sweetheart” (Pynchon 453). Although this direct-address is clearly aimed at Margherita on the diegetic level, it collapses higher narrative levels by potentially addressing the extradiegetic reader as well.¹⁹² Similarly, at the end of the novel, the rocket that is both in the film and over the theater where the film plays symbolically continues the arc of Rocket 00000, in which Gottfried is entombed in the Imipolex suit Margherita wore just before her liberation.

Much like Pynchon’s postmodernist poetics, driven by the ontological slippage between Eros and Thanatos, Margherita embodies the Eros/Thanatos dialectic through her queer SM practice, a practice that renders her body a literal text to be read and deciphered. She recalls how “Thanatz would sit with her lying across his knees, and read the [whip] scars down her back, as a gypsy reads a palm. [. . .] Scar-tissue formed silently on her, cell by cell, in the night” (Pynchon 492).¹⁹³ Here, we find an embodied manifestation of my previous chapter’s claim: SM texts produce further SM texts. In

¹⁹² This use of direct-address problematizes the common critical assumption that Pynchon’s direct-address is intended for a male reader and/or the male viewer of pornography. Though Duyfhuizen argues that Pynchon’s use of “you” is directed at “the text’s male narratees and ultimately its male reader/ voyeurs,” in note 2 he acknowledges that “Pynchon has at least one passage, in which the narratee ‘you’ is gendered female, although the passage itself may refer analeptically to Leni Pokler’s childhood” (“A Suspension Forever” n.p.). Similarly, Wes Chapman identifies Pynchon’s use of direct-address as intended for men who “are by far the greater consumers of pornography; men constitute by far the larger proportion of rapists and sexual abusers” (“Male Pro-Feminism” n.p.). For a complex discussion of direct-address, see McHale *Constructing Postmodernism* (87-114).

¹⁹³ This scene exemplifies how *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a book about reading. McHale elaborates how “Pynchon’s characters persist in behaving as though their world were a text—which of course, literally, it is—and they its readers. Säure Bummer reads reefers, Miklos Thanatz reads whip-scars, . . . Ronald Cherrychoke reads personal effects (cravat, fountain-pen, pince-nez). . . . Mr. Pointstman interprets the Book (Pavlov, not Holy Writ). . . . Enzian the Rocket-Kabbalist regards the bombed-out German landscape as a text. . . . Again and again postmodernist allegorical worlds collapse into ‘literal’ texts in just this way” (*Postmodernist* 146).

attempting to read her scars, Thanatz refigures the interpretive work of readers of *Gravity's Rainbow* itself. Pynchon's mapping, creating thin lines in a vast network of connection, is represented in the thin lines of Margherita's scars, scars constituting a form of postmodernist text inscribed in her skin that is also a chronicle of her SM experiences. At once a practitioner of SM, an author of queer narratives, and an embodiment of a queer postmodernist text within a text, Margherita is the point on which much of the novel's postmodern narrative converges.

Although I have foregrounded Margherita's sexual practices as a focal point for the queer undercurrents of Pynchon's novel, sadomasochistic valences are scattered throughout the text and not only in sexually explicit scenes. Indeed, the whole narrative seems to be bound by a sadomasochistic logic—focalized in the novel's central symbol, the V-2 Rocket that frames the entire narrative arc. Pynchon constructs the V-2 Rocket as a gender-queer object, described as a phallus, a penetrating cock, a bride, and a womb from which only death is born—a gender-queer symbol of destruction and desire that refigures the queer sexual-textual interplay found in Margherita's SM narratives. Its sadomasochistic logic embeds it in the same eroticization of violence, power relations, and the death drive that characterize Pudding's, Blicero's, and Margherita's investment in *jouissance*, a queer pleasure that destabilizes dominant narratives. The rocket's impending, explosive *jouissance* forecloses the possibility of a teleological future in the narrative; in place of telos, *Gravity's Rainbow* offers instead a queer resistance to futurity.

As the narrative immediately shifts from the fatal climax of Gottfried and Blicero's sadomasochistic relationship to a direct-address of the theatergoers in the

novel's final moments, a flash-forward to 1972, the threat of the rocket looming above the theater becomes more than an abstracted warning.¹⁹⁴ The end of the novel breaks “a basic ontological boundary, the one between the real-world object, the book which shares our world with us, and the fictional objects and world which the text projects” (McHale, *Postmodernist* 180). Indeed, SM practice is repeatedly associated with breaking the ontological boundaries between text and life, as seen in the dialogic relation between Margherita's film roles and her SM practice—both of which violate narrative frames through a violent and pleasurable disruption of ontological levels, as noted above. Like Margherita, the rocket is an emblem of the sadomasochistic Eros/Thanatos dialectic, which haunts the entire novel. As a symbol of nonnormative sexual practice and death, the gender-queer rocket becomes a technology of pleasure, of power, and of subversion—a queer, postmodernist symbol of ontological instability that opens and closes the novel without ever completing its narrative arc.

TAKING SADO-ANARCHISM SERIOUSLY

Thanatz explains to Ludwig how the State “needs our submission so that it may remain in power. It needs our lusts after dominance so that it can co-opt us into its own power game. There is no joy in it, only power. I tell you, if S and M could be established

¹⁹⁴ This is partly accomplished by the immediacy of Pynchon's representation of the rocket's catastrophic potential for destruction, which is framed through the death of an individual character. The narrative's focalization through Gottfried, a poignant depiction of Gottfried's final thoughts, enables the reader to become emotionally invested in the destructive effects of the rocket. For the first time in the novel, the narrator describes the impact of rocket violence in terms of a single character, as opposed to earlier descriptions of the rocket that were focused on physical destruction to land and property and did not reveal the direct effects on an individual character. The emotional tension from Gottfried's death carries over to the final scene, where a rocket hovers, threatening, above “us.”

universally, at the family level, the State would wither away” (Pynchon 751). The State in *Gravity’s Rainbow* does not wither away, and critics have read this as a failure of political rebellion, overlooking how Sado-anarchism’s political, sexual, and textual functions reveal queerness’s centrality to the novel’s content and structure. Moreover, reading Pynchon’s representations of SM and Sado-anarchism as serious meditations on sex, power, and embodied pleasure situates *Gravity’s Rainbow* within a broader proliferation of knowledges on sex and sexuality at the time of its publication. While I have already discussed how a focus on Pynchon’s SM material unveils connections between this postmodern classic and queer SM subcultures/knowledges, it’s also worth discussing the many ways that *Gravity’s Rainbow* appears to narratively prefigure Foucault’s theorization of sexuality as a sociohistorical construct. Pynchon’s Sado-anarchism theorizes sex and power in a way that is strikingly similar to Foucault’s theorization of the “deployment of sexuality [that] operates according to mobile, polymorphous, and contingent techniques of power” (106), from *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, which was published in France just three years after the U.S. publication of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Though *Gravity’s Rainbow* reflects institutions’ use of sexuality as a technology for control and regulation, the range of discourses concerning sexuality within the novel also construct sexual practice as a tool of resistance (discourse itself being a tool that “undermines and exposes [power], renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart” [*History* 101]). Like Thanatz’s recognition that establishing queer sexuality at the family level would threaten the State, Foucault explains how the family “conveys the law and the juridical dimension in the deployment of sexuality” and how “sexuality has its privileged point of development in the family” (*History* 108); thus, any

queering of pleasures that occurs on this level can potentially disrupt the process of founding social order.

The novel's encyclopedic scope models the proliferation of discourses concerning sexuality that Foucault analyzes, discourses that force sexuality "to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail" (*History* 18); in *Gravity's Rainbow*, institutional power quests after the "truth" of sexuality (particularly in terms of Slothrop's), and yet these official discourses invariably come up against the messiness of bodies and pleasures that cannot be contained, thereby constituting a Foucauldian counterdiscourse. The paranoid history depicted in *Gravity's Rainbow*—"a peculiar *structure* that no one admitted to" (Pynchon 195-6)—aligns with Foucault's theorization of sexuality as "a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power" (*History* 106). *Gravity's Rainbow* is itself a great surface network that links embodied pleasure, sexual practices, and scientific and political knowledge—including knowledge about how queerness might respond to the major strategies of power. Indeed, Foucault investigates the operations of power behind scientific records and official historical facts in much the same way that Pynchon's paranoid history uncovers "layer upon layer of conspiracy behind the official historical facts of the Second World War" (McHale, *Postmodernist* 91) and, we might add, behind the institutional deployment of sexuality.

Insisting on the pleasures of Pynchon's pornographic representations—even those that occur within institutional frames—reveals how Pynchon prefigures Foucault's

assertion that “the rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures” (*History* 157)—that is, that which exceeds the discursive (disciplinary) constraints of sexuality as defined by official discourses. This is not to naively imply that there is an “outside” or a “beyond” the constraints of power, but rather to emphasize what Pynchon scholarship has chosen to ignore in *Gravity’s Rainbow*: SM’s imbrication within institutional power does not negate its potential as a site of resistance, it is to acknowledge that “power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, *History* 93). The possibility of diegetic and extradiegetic queer pleasures challenges Pynchon scholarship that delinks postmodernist narrative subversion from the text’s SM content—such as Herman and Weisenburger’s reading in which SM becomes the basis for their dark conclusion: “your ‘chances for freedom’ were never really chances. That too was a useful fantasy” (221).¹⁹⁵ The idea that “the novel imagines no way out from under the dominion of [the] trinity” of technology, capital, and war whose “governing spirits” are Dominus Blicero and Domina Nocturna (Herman and Weisenburger 220) obscures power’s multidirectional operations in Pudding’s and Blicero’s SM.

Acknowledging the potential queerness of Pynchon’s readers further illuminates how postmodernist subversion and SM reinforce and structure one another. Indeed, Herman and Weisenburger’s introduction—which identifies “dominance” “as posing the greatest threat to the ‘chances for freedom’ in Pynchon’s storyworld and, arguably, the readers’ as well” (15)—functions as a prophylactic for both critic and reader, protecting

¹⁹⁵ Indeed, the study of queer SM texts and culture, particularly Chapter Two’s exploration of the role of fantasy in queer SM pornography and its relation to SM’s queer world-making potential, argues just that: fantasy is indeed useful, but not for the ways Herman and Weisenburger cynically imply here.

us from association with those “salacious but disturbing energies of mock pornographic parodies” (17). By describing “domination” as “freedom’s antonym, defining what threatens the supposedly inherent rights upheld in liberal thought and practice” (15), Herman and Weisenburger discount the pleasure that might inhere in Pynchon’s SM—for either extradiegetic readers or characters. Recall Gottfried’s enjoyment of “the word *bitch*, spoken now in a certain tone of voice” (Pynchon 105) or Katje’s suppressed moans when she canes Pudding (Pynchon 237), not to mention Pynchon’s more generalized representation of erotic pain as “the clearest poetry, the endearment of greatest worth” (Pynchon 237).

The omission of readerly pleasures is particularly interesting since Herman and Weisenburger stress the importance of Slothrop getting “a hard-on from *reading* words on a page,” a “somatic reaction” that “acknowledges reading as an embodied practice” (102). While Herman and Weisenburger recognize that Pynchon’s pornographic material might cause embodied reactions in extradiegetic readers, they are only able to imagine this in terms of negative affect, like a “gut-wrenching revulsion at the plain words relating Brigadier Pudding’s coprophagia” (102).¹⁹⁶ Indeed, previous readings have dismissed the possibility that a reader of *Gravity’s Rainbow* might have a sexual life in which—as for some of Pynchon’s characters—domination is not experienced as freedom’s antonym but rather as a necessary condition of (sexual) freedom. Pain for SM practitioners is not an end in and of itself but rather that which signals “the ritual, the

¹⁹⁶ It’s worth noting that “gut-wrenching” appears at least three times in Herman and Weisenburger’s discussion of Pudding’s scene.

anticipation, the profound trust” (Drivenwoman, *What Color* 13) that makes SM practice a valuable exploration of the pleasures of domination and submission.

While Foucault focuses on the nineteenth-century creation of sexuality and its relation to power, Pynchon’s novel articulates the power/sex dynamics that were contemporary with the publication of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, illustrating the lasting and pervasive effects of nineteenth-century sexuality discourses on postwar America. Such lasting effects manifest themselves in Pynchon scholarship, which almost invariably deploys the stigmatizing language of official discourses when reading SM. This critical strategy attempts to rescue Pynchon’s text from its pornographic pleasures by distancing his representations of queer sex from embodied practices and insisting that SM, or queerness more generally, operates solely as a metaphor or satire in Pynchon.

Highlighting the possibility of pleasure in sexual power games—in Pynchon’s storyworld and among extradiegetic readers—counters SM’s pathologization and challenges the claim that domination invariably forecloses our chances for freedom. Instead, we should see these pleasures as potential vehicles for transgressing institutional power or, at the very least (and perhaps more importantly), as overlooked modes of knowledge production; in either case, the queer pleasures of Pynchon’s text become fundamental to his paradigmatic postmodernism.

Pynchon’s use of SM as way to explore myriad aspects of sexuality and power, speaks to SM’s value as a critical optic. At first glance, such a claim appears to vindicate the desexualizing tendencies of Pynchon scholarship that I so heavily critique. Significantly, such tendencies are not unique to Pynchon studies or literary scholarship in general; as Tim Dean observes, “critical squeamishness about sex appears especially

pronounced in Queer studies within the US” (“No Sex Please” 615). In part, by leveraging practitioner-produced SM theory in the study of canonical fiction, this chapter was able to retain the importance of SM pleasures and their material effects, in much the same way that my previous chapters’ emphasis on SM’s materiality intervened in queer theory’s abstraction of SM as an ego-shattering force. Indeed, a great deal of SM’s explanatory power is lost if we let its positive-productive potential slip from view; however, the breadth of Pynchon’s SM material also necessitated a return to antirelational theories of SM. What emerges from this chapter’s queer theoretical pairing is significant: By gesturing toward the complementarity of antirelational and positive-productive approaches to SM, this chapter initiated a larger critical undertaking that will be taken up in the Conclusion, namely, using SM as a hermeneutic through which we might begin to reconcile the queer negativity/utopia divide.

Conclusion. After the Fact

Usually I think that analysis is fine and necessary but it's beginning to overshadow the real basics about sm.

What are the basics? I *enjoy* sm play. I got involved in sm to explore my pleasure, in particular, my sexual pleasure. That's why I do sm—for *pleasure*. I don't do it to get insights about power or pain or anything else. Those all come after the fact. I'm tired of explaining sm. After awhile explanation begins to be an apology—and I refuse to apologize for my sexuality. (23)

—Janet Schrim, 1979
*What Color is Your Handkerchief:
A Lesbian S/M Sexuality Reader*

From the outset, *SM in Postmodern America* has emphasized pleasure as the defining feature of SM. Whether encountering SM representations in postmodern literature and practitioner-produced texts or uncovering the historical traces of embodied social-sexual practices in archival letters, this project has read almost exclusively for SM's material effects, identifying what enables SM pleasures and what such pleasures generate—either in literature or in life. I have staunchly resisted the tendency across both postmodern literary criticism and queer theory to “de-eroticize [SM] by avoiding looking directly at what corporeal and psychical *acts* constitute it” (Hart 75). As the epigraph suggests, I have framed this project as a return to the basics of SM; beyond reading for SM's pleasures across both high and low cultural forms, returning to the basics of SM has also meant a return to its historical origins in the U.S., the communities that developed it,

and the practices that defined these communities. From this study a new understanding of SM emerges, one that is informed by theories found in practitioner-produced SM writing—both those that are directly articulated (as in the mixed-genre texts and personal essays) and those arrived at by implication through close-readings of queer SM pornography. My readings of postmodern fiction have deployed these practitioner-produced SM theories as a way of linking the simultaneous proliferation of explicit, sadomasochistic representations in canonical fiction with their less visible counterparts—the texts produced by and for queer SM practitioners from the late 1960s through the 1990s.

Through my study of practitioner-produced SM pornography I reclaim SM from its association with the antirelational turn in queer theory and demonstrate how psychoanalytic approaches to SM have obfuscated SM's positive and productive potential. By identifying pornography as a significant source of knowledge about queerness and sexuality, I demonstrate how SM functions as a queer world-making practice rooted in queer relationality, community formation, erotic education, and the pursuit of fantasy. This potential becomes initially apparent in *Mr. Benson*, in which John Preston illustrates the unique intersubjective relations enabled by SM, while also establishing the importance of safety, knowledge, consent, and community to SM practice. By circulating these types of social-sexual knowledges, *Mr. Benson* and other texts like it suggest how the pedagogical aspects of pornography are at least as important as pornography's prurient appeal.

Practitioner-produced SM erotica also illuminates the future-oriented temporality of SM pleasure and how, even beyond the planning required for the realization of

individual sexual fantasies, SM and SM pornographies work in the service of a queerer future. The utopic potential that inheres in practitioner-produced SM erotica is further developed in later lesbian and queer SM texts, in which erotic narrative becomes a means for imagining the future otherwise. More specifically, representations of robust social-sexual SM communities with the potential for cross-gender pleasures—like those in Califia's and Queen's fiction—mobilize the projective function of narrative as a way to encourage readers to imagine the world otherwise and work toward that queerer future's realization.

The productive potential that emerges from SM's relation to both narrative and futurity becomes central to my analysis of mixed-genre SM texts and the archival letters written in response to them. Building on the four tenets of queer world-making established in my analysis of practitioner-produced SM erotica, the archival chapter provides historical evidence for the ways in which practitioner-produced SM texts (both pornography and mixed-genre guidebooks) actually effected change in the material world. Specifically, the self-writing practices found in archival letters to Townsend and Samois indicate not only how SM narratives generate further narrative, but they also reveal the material and affective impact of practitioner-produced SM texts on the formation of SM identities and communities.

In this sense, SM's queer world-making potential and its reliance on narrative illuminate how SM has historically generated diverse modes of networking, communication, social and political organization, and art. Understanding SM's narrative reliance makes visible the unique ways that SM appears to straddle the social, the sexual, and the aesthetic. Indeed, Larry Townsend attributes the late 1960s' and early 70s'

transformation of scattered friend networks into a fully-fledged leather subculture to the circulation of practitioner-produced texts: “We broke this barrier where you were afraid to write anything. The government wasn’t censoring the written word anymore because they’d lost every case the[y] tried to bring up on it. When this happened, then, I think, you were free to put things in the mail that you would’ve been afraid to put in before. . . . Suddenly, we had broken out of this and Greenleaf Classics was publishing our stuff and then Olympia Press started doing it” (Townsend, “Interview” 3). And as my Introduction suggests, the freedom to publish explicit SM content that fueled SM community formation was itself indebted to the legal battles waged over homosexual and sadomasochistic material in postmodern fiction.

Re-reading postmodern texts through the knowledge produced by queer SM communities reveals how postmodern SM representations are far more aligned with embodied queer practices than previous scholarship has allowed for—even beyond their shared relationship to obscenity law discussed in the Introduction. By applying a positive-productive SM theory to postmodern literature, my readings of canonical authors like Burroughs, Coover, Acker, and Pynchon radically revise critical approaches to such work. Insisting on the queer pleasures of SM in postmodern representations problematizes the anti-SM sentiment that has pervaded much of postmodern literary criticism. Where previous scholars have sanitized SM of its eroticism, I illustrate the degree to which SM (pleasure) is intrinsic to postmodern narrative practices. Moreover, my return to canonical literature in the final chapter indicates how a queer approach to postmodern fiction also sheds new light on queer studies. My close readings of Pynchon’s SM representations in *Gravity’s Rainbow* extend the relevance of a positive-

productive theorization of SM by emphasizing the underlying queerness of Pynchon's work—a reading that counters the presumed heteromascularity of Pynchon's oeuvre. At the same time, the myriad SM representations in Pynchon also necessitate a return to antirelational understandings of SM.

Far from weakening my claims about the significance of positive-productive understandings of SM, the return to queer negativity in the last chapter broadens the scope of my intervention by illuminating the complementarity of these two seemingly opposed frameworks—how we might reconcile the apparent binary between academic, antirelational SM theories and the positive-productive SM theory found amongst practitioners. Thus, my dissertation's import lies not solely in developing an alternative queer understanding of SM as my Introduction suggests, but also in using SM erotics as a critical optic through which we might reconcile the debates over queer negativity and queer utopia.

Although my Introduction's literature review traces the genealogy of queer theory's antirelational turn, it's worth reiterating its key points. Initially formulated in Bersani's "Is The Rectum A Grave?" (1987) and then expanded in *Homos* (1995), the antirelational thesis posits queer sex as a site of disruption since "male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal . . . and in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents *jouissance* as a mode of ascesis" ("Rectum" 222). More recently, Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) has reanimated the debates over negativity and futurity amongst queer theorists. The tension between these two sides was brought to a head at the 2005 MLA Convention session, "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," organized by Robert Caserio. Abbreviated

versions of the five presentations by Caserio, Edelman, Halberstam, Muñoz, and Dean appeared in *PMLA* the following May, with subsequent extensions of this work appearing in Dean's articles, Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009), and Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure* (2011). Indeed, this panel and *PMLA*'s "Forum: Conference Debates" have become infamous for highlighting the schisms in the field and for the acerbic exchanges they elicited. For instance, in Muñoz's recollection of the panel, Edelman "exclaim[ed] that there was nothing new or radical about utopia" (Muñoz, "Thinking Beyond Antirelationality" 825). To which Muñoz responds by characterizing the antirelational turn as "the gay white man's last stand" (Muñoz, "Thinking Beyond Antirelationality" 825), by which he means "gay white male scholars who imagine sexuality as a discrete category that can be abstracted and isolated from other antagonisms in the social, which include race and gender" (Muñoz, "Thinking Beyond Antirelationality" 826).

Since the lively MLA panel, subsequent scholarship—like that of Tim Dean and Mari Ruti—has begun to deconstruct these debates, gesturing toward the ways in which the queer futurity and negativity camps are not as radically opposed as a great deal of the rhetoric surrounding these debates would lead one to believe. While Dean critiques Edelman's reductive use of psychoanalytic concepts—like the death drive—and Ruti questions Edelman's fraught reliance on posthumanist scholarship, my own intervention in these debates takes a different tack, one that uses the positive/negative dialectic that inheres in SM as a way of understanding the interdependence of queer negativity and futurity. I ask what it means to employ negativity in the name of an alternative future that diverges from the reproduction of hegemonic social order.

To begin with, using both positive-productive understandings of SM and antirelational ones in my readings of Pynchon is partially clarified by considering the different archives from which each theory developed. Through readings of Dickens, Hitchcock, and other popular texts, Edelman's formulation of queer negativity almost entirely elides the specificity of queer erotic life; similarly, antirelational theorizations of SM specifically—such as Halberstam's and Freeman's—are rooted in aestheticized SM representations that do not reflect queer social-sexual practices. Thus, it should come as no surprise that theories developed from archives that are so distant from embodied SM practice tend to emphasize SM's abstract and psychic implications, rather than its material effects as my own work does. And yet, these theories' different foci allow us to read—without contradiction—any single instance of SM through both lenses. This methodological approach would be equally applicable for both SM representations and embodied SM practice. The antirelational SM lens makes visible SM's (discursive) disruptions and the positive-productive lens illuminates the social and relational modes that SM both requires and necessitates. Contextualizing the abstract, antirelational aspects of SM erotics within their material manifestations reinserts the social-sexual aspects of SM into the conversation. In this sense, we can understand how SM gives rise to new modes of queer relationality and to communities, even while such formations are oriented around self-shattering, excessive pleasures that destabilize subjectivity.

What is more, SM's own complementary duality of pain and pleasure might be likened to the duality between queer negativity and futurity. In much the same way that

pain in SM is not an end goal but rather a necessary prelude to pleasure,¹⁹⁷ the disruptive *jouissance* of queer negativity serves primarily as a prelude to and impetus for imagining the world otherwise, or in the words of Tim Dean, “the shattering of the civilized ego betokens not the end of sociality but rather its inception” (“The Antisocial Homosexual” 827). This positive/negative dialectic is already acknowledged in Muñoz’s search for the complexities of a queer past in that he recognizes how hope is not “the only modality of emotional recognition that structures belonging; sometimes . . . ‘negative’ emotions bind people together” (*Cruising* 97-8). More significantly, the positive/negative dialectic is central to Muñoz’s formulation of a utopian hermeneutic, which “has a positive valence, that of a projection forward, and a negative function, which is the work of critique” (*Cruising* 125).

As my previous chapter demonstrates, the same duality inheres in SM as well. Specifically, SM’s antirelational *jouissance* performs the “negative” function of critique since, as Halberstam observes, certain forms of masochism offer “a critique of the very ground of the human” and in particular hegemonic modes of agency, political action, and gendered behavior (*Queer Art* 139). At the same time, the embodied pleasures of SM that give rise to the shattering force Halberstam mentions are made possible by queer modes of relationality and community formation. These community formations lay the groundwork for imagining the future differently, as my readings of pornography and my research in the archives suggest. In other words, the material conditions that enable SM’s *jouissance* are themselves dependent upon the production and circulation of social-sexual

¹⁹⁷ This idea that pain is merely a precondition to SM’s pleasure and not its ultimate goal can be seen in practitioner-produced SM texts like *What Color* (especially in Drivenwoman’s piece) and *Coming to Power*, as well as in academic theorizations of SM, as in Deleuze’s *Coldness and Cruelty* and in Bersani’s *Homos*.

knowledge practices that effect positive changes in queer life and resist “the stultifying temporal logic of a broken-down present” (Muñoz, “Thinking Beyond Antirelationality” 826). Thus, queer SM practice exemplifies one way that people have intentionally created social relationships and ethical practices around pleasures so intense that they are momentarily self-annihilating.

It appears difficult to reconcile the utopic components of SM with Edelman’s mandate “to refuse the insistence of hope itself as affirmation” (*No Future* 4) and his insistence that there can be no future for queerness; however, a consideration of SM’s temporality makes especially apparent how the lived and experienced realities of SM emblemize the dialectic of queer negativity/utopia. Edelman can spurn the temporality of desire (and pleasure) only by insisting on queerness’s structural role as an affirmation of “a constant, eruptive *jouissance* that responds to the inarticulable Real” (*No Future* 74) so that “far from perpetuating the fantasy of meaning’s eventual realization, the queer comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form” (*No Future* 4). Edelman’s structural account of queerness needn’t specify the means through which queerness’s constant access to *jouissance* is effected. However, even in Edelman one can see the sadomasochistic valences that underscore his conception of *jouissance*—which are made far more explicit in other formulations of queer negativity, like Halberstam’s. Thus, if we are to accept that sadomasochistic pleasure grants access to the explosive force of *jouissance* and with it the disruption of coherent notions of subjectivity and even of signification itself, then it is also worth considering what facilitates the achievement of such radical pleasures.

Reinserting the basics of SM into this conversation unveils the future-oriented temporality that inheres even in theorizations of queer negativity. More specifically, the temporality of SM pleasure indicates how queer negativity paradoxically relies on an investment in futurity. As discussed in my chapter on SM pornographies, the material realization of individual (SM) sexual fantasy scenarios demands a more extensive investment in futurity and ethical relationality than other forms of sexual practice. SM and its abstract potential for *jouissance* do not occur in a vacuum; rather, SM requires joining (or establishing) a community oriented around shared sexual desires, finding a compatible partner, communicating about desires and limits, planning a scene, and (when applicable) procuring the necessary accoutrements. It would not be rare for SM scenes to be planned hours, days, or even weeks in advance, not to mention the temporality of the scene's enactment in which its prolongation—the eroticization of suspense—further extends the temporality of SM practice and its polymorphously perverse pleasures.¹⁹⁸

While planning, communication, and the prolongation of the sexual act are ideally a component of all embodied sexual practice, SM necessitates such processes in a more overt manner and in doing so the very nature of SM magnifies the forward-looking temporality of sex. The queer social-sexual formations that SM necessitates become a model of ethical and consensual approaches to (sexual) relationality, which gesture toward what Muñoz might call a queerer future with better sex and more pleasure. SM can be said to create positive social formations precisely by cultivating ethical approaches to self-shattering sexual pleasures. SM erotics highlight the degree to which the

¹⁹⁸ As Freeman observes, “genuinely Sadean sadomasochism plays with and literalizes power *as time* . . . bottoms are rewarded for physical endurance and for waiting; tops for anticipating a bottom's needs and for maintaining suspense” (*Time Binds* 153).

shattering effects of *jouissance* require a hopeful relationship to an as yet to be realized future.

Such claims raise significant questions—To what degree does SM’s queer utopic potential extend beyond the sexual scene itself? Do these ethical relationships to trust, consent, and community carve out a future that is not shaped by hegemonic, disciplinary norms, or are their effects localized in isolated erotic encounters? We might begin to answer these questions by recalling how SM is a significant source of social-sexual knowledges relating not only to pleasure but to safer sex practices as well. Aside from the eroticization of safer sex practices that create a more informed community, SM also effects changes in relationality that diverge from a “stultifying heterosexual present” (Muñoz, *Cruising* 49). As Lynda Hart observes, SM communities “*have achieved* an intellectual, spiritual, and political bonding in ways that precisely contradict the dominant culture’s notion of maintaining order through disciplining categories” (Hart 222). The potential for SM to bring people together is best expressed by “one wise woman who has been doing this for many years . . . [and] said, ‘Leather is thicker than blood’” (Rubin, *CTP* 221). The idea that SM creates connections across and amongst various communities calls to mind the type of queer utopic world Muñoz envisions in his discussion of relational forms that “signa[l] the kind of queer potentiality that existed before the stultifying effects of some identitarian narratives installed after the modern gay movement took hold” (Muñoz, *Cruising* 86). Indeed, a common interest in SM and the marginalization of this interest in both hetero- and homonormative contexts has historically necessitated queer community formations oriented around pleasure. Significantly, SM communities “are held together, however sometimes uneasily, *not* by

identity categories but by rhetorical and political affiliations” (Hart 221). Thus, SM has the potential to create interpersonal affiliations amongst individuals “who are otherwise kept separate by identity categories (bisexual, transsexual, lesbian, etc., etc.)” and by “racial, ethnic, and class categories” (Hart 221).

Furthermore, as my study of archival material and the leather history outlined in the Introduction suggest, in queer life SM produces communitarian practices that extend far beyond the sexual act itself; as Larry Townsend observes, “well beyond the activities in blackroom and bed chamber, our people exist as potent forces within the homosexual community” since “the leather population both constitutes a stable element within the gay community and it contains its greatest reservoir of organized strength” (*Handbook* 277-78). Indeed, as Gayle Rubin’s historical studies of leather culture explain, SM “became linked to . . . patterns of life and work, the transformation of neighborhoods, the growth of community organizations, the provision of public services, the staging of athletic events, and ultimately the emergence of locally based and funded social and political groups” (Halperin 99). While the historical and anthropological work of Gayle Rubin paints a far more in depth picture of the myriad ways that leathersex became enmeshed in social life and effected significant cultural and subcultural changes, my own project demonstrates how such world-making activities rely on practitioner-produced SM texts and SM narrative more generally. In this sense, *SM in Postmodern America* reveals how the social, sexual, and textual practices of leatherfolk constitute significant modes of queer world-making, the effects of which extend beyond texts and beyond the bedroom as well.

By articulating how SM's shattering *jouissance* is enabled by community formations based on pleasure (as opposed to disciplinary identity categories), SM becomes a critical hermeneutic that gestures toward a reconciliation of the antisocial/utopia divide in recent queer theory. That this intervention in queer theory was initially suggested by SM in Pynchon is significant since, in some senses, I am returning to the point my Introduction makes: that postmodern fiction has something to tell us about queerness. Indeed, *SM in Postmodern America* is animated by the dialogue between SM's most visible manifestations in canonical fiction and its least visible manifestations in marginal subcultures. The dialogic relation between these two cultural phenomena—which were largely presumed to have developed along discrete trajectories—began with my Introduction's historical framework. More specifically, my Introduction's overview of obscenity cases identifies how the legal battles waged over explicit homosexual and sadomasochistic content in postmodern fiction paved the way for the proliferation of practitioner-produced SM texts, which themselves facilitated the formation of leather subculture. My individual case studies in subsequent chapters recuperate the knowledges produced from these communities on the cultural margins and use them to intervene in academic understandings of SM in both literary studies and queer theory. In turn, my final chapter's study of SM in canonical fiction and its broader implications for queer theory that the Conclusion takes up further demonstrate the value of this project's queer pairing. Returning to the basics of SM—its pleasures and material effects—allows us to reconsider the significance and function of SM in postmodern America.

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